MY HAPPY MARRIAGE
AKUMI AGITOGI
4

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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

4

Akumi Agitogi

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Tsukiho Tsukioka

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AKUMI AGITOGI

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PROLOGUE

She arrived in the imperial capital as the curtain fell on autumn and rose on winter.

When she disembarked from the carriage and stood on the station platform, her big leather bag in hand, she almost collided with the dense throng hastily coming and going all around her.

The capital's always so crowded.

A few years prior, she had lived and worked in the city, but after being gone for so long, the hustle and bustle dampened her spirits.

Sighing, she adjusted her white-gloved grip on the bag and began to make her way through the mass of people.

A frigid wind buffeted her when she slipped out of the station. Shivering against the cold, she adjusted the collar of her knee-length coat.

"Brrr…"

Spontaneously voicing her reaction to the weather, she began to head over to the bus stop—

"Miss."

—when she thought she heard a delicate voice call out to her.

The whispered address was so faint, it was nearly drowned out by the bustling crowd, yet it had undoubtedly reached her ears.

Still, she was in the middle of a crowd.

People were raising their voices here and there, so whoever said that could have been talking to someone else.

I wasn't told anyone would be coming to pick me up, either.

As she hesitated for a moment, thinking she might've been mistaken, she heard the voice again.

"Excuse me, miss."

Hearing the address much closer to her than expected, she whirled around in surprise.

Greeting her was a bespectacled man in his forties wearing a gentle smile. His strange eyes left an especially striking impression on her, for they completely contrasted with his amicable expression.

And those eyes of his, with their uncanny sparkle, were undoubtedly trained on her.

"What do you want with me?"

At her question, the man widened his grin, wrinkles creasing at the edges of his eyes.

"My apologizes for hailing you so rudely, Miss Kaoruko Jinnouchi."

"Huh?"

How did he know her name?

Right as she—Kaoruko—widened her eyes, the man continued to speak.

"My name is Naoshi Usui. I have something that I need your assistance with."

⚜ *CHAPTER 1* ⚜

Scars and Precaution

At first morning's light one winter day, Miyo Saimori stood before the mirror in her room with a serious look on her face.

She put her arms through the sleeves of her winter kimono, which bore a charming light green camellia pattern. Tying her *obi* sash tight, she brushed her long black hair and tidied it up, before applying a light amount of makeup to her face and double-checking that there weren't any parts of her outfit that seemed out of order.

…Okay.

She couldn't let herself look undignified as the fiancée of Kiyoka Kudou, the head of the Kudou family and commander of his own military unit.

"Miyo, we need to go soon."

"O-okay!"

A voice called to her from outside her room.

Hastily grabbing her *haori* coat and handbag, she left her room to find Kiyoka waiting for her in his military uniform.

Both his lustrous light-brown hair and strikingly handsome features were the same as always, yet his face looked somewhat stiff and clouded. It had been this way ever since they had returned to the capital following their visit to Kiyoka's parents' villa.

"Kiyoka."

Miyo quietly called his name, and he let out a small sigh before looking down at her.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes, but just a little… It’s my first time going to the station for something like this.”

The two were about to depart for Kiyoka’s workplace, the building that housed the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

As for why Miyo was accompanying him, the reason laid in an encounter they’d had a few days prior at the train station.

“My dear daughter.”

Merely recalling his voice filled her with inexplicable dread.

Feeling the blood quickly drain from her face, Miyo pushed herself to smile.

“But I’m okay. I’ll do my best.”

“Don’t get so worked up. It’s just a simple briefing.”

She found the sight of Kiyoka bringing his lips into a smile oddly comforting.

Kiyoka was taking what had happened to Godou—essentially his right-hand man—the hardest of anyone.

That was why Miyo needed to give everything she could to support him. She couldn’t afford to be scared herself.

They both moved to the entryway, where Yurie was standing ready to see them off.

Today was a rare day when Miyo was going out and wouldn’t have the time to handle the daily chores, so she’d had the Kudou family’s servant, Yurie, come to take care of the house for them.

“Have a good day, Young Master, Miss Miyo.”

Although she must certainly have felt the stiff atmosphere, the pair's nerves and anxieties…their anger and sadness coalescing together, Yurie beamed gently at them like always.

Her warm grin, like one a mother would give their child, set them at ease.

In fact, both Miyo's and Kiyoka's faces naturally gave way to smiles of their own.

"We're off."

Outside the house, the sun still hadn't fully risen. There was a chill in the air that prickled the skin, and their breath turned white as it escaped their lips.

They both got into the automobile, and Kiyoka immediately started up the engine and gripped the wheel.

As the car slowly departed the house, he quietly murmured.

"Sorry for dragging you along with me."

"Not at all."

"Allow me to apologize. I don't know anything concrete about how things will play out from here on. But you've definitely been put in harm's way."

Miyo's heart ached seeing her fiancée's strained, upset countenance.

If something dangerous happened, the responsibility wouldn't lie with Kiyoka. Who could possibly condemn him for anything?

"…Still. I couldn't stay uninvolved from the start. So please."

Don't blame yourself.

She would have added that if she could, but Miyo knew very well that no matter how much she shouted or how much she appealed to

him, it would be all be meaningless right now. Kiyoka was so kindhearted that it would have been impossible to convince him not to worry about it.

Gripped with pent-up sadness and frustration, Miyo thought back to what had happened that day.

◇◇◇

When Miyo, Kiyoka, and Arata Usuba returned from the Kudou villa, they were greeted by an unfamiliar middle-aged man at the station.

"My dear daughter… Ah, that sounds too theatrical, doesn't it?"

The man gave a brazen chuckle. He appeared exceedingly normal on the surface.

His dark brown hair, mixed with grays and whites in places, was rather short, and though his face was long, his features were finely chiseled, to which were affixed a pair of round, black-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in *hakama* pants and a richly colored kimono, with an Inverness coat thrown on top. While his outfit was of decent quality, he still had an altogether average appearance.

Nevertheless, even Miyo could tell he was no ordinary man.

From behind his glasses, his eyes glimmered with an uncanny and hawkish twinkle.

Kiyoka and Arata had already dropped their luggage and were standing on guard with menacing looks. The air around them grew tense, and Miyo's breath caught in her throat.

"I take it you're Naoshi Usui?" Kiyoka asked calmly, to which the man responded to by putting a hand on the back of his head and bowing forward slightly, never breaking his smile.

"Yes, that's right. I'm Usui."

“In that case, how about you drop that hollow act of yours?” Arata, his expression grim, cut in before Usui could respond.

“That goody-goody attitude isn’t fooling anyone. Looking into your eyes…I recall something that I was once told—that the Usuis’ eldest son had always been a terribly cold-hearted, cruel, and out-of-control child,” Arata continued. “Though it looks like you’ve settled down over the years.” The tone of his voice was quiet, but strained, and even standing behind him, Miyo keenly felt the edge in the air.

“The thing is, people don’t lose touch with their roots that easily.”

A silence enveloped the group, only for Usui to shatter it a moment later.

“*Hah, ah-hah-hah-hah!* That’s fair. Leave it to the heir of the Usuba main family to see everything clearly.”

Usui guffawed and gripped his stomach, his voice occasionally growing tight as tears formed in the corners of his eyes. Wheezing as he continued to convulse with laughter for a few moments, he lifted his face up to show his easy smile had transformed into a ferocious grin, his teeth bared.

He fixed his sharp eyes on Miyo, who both Kiyoka and Arata were shielding.

“A personality is a trivial thing. I can fabricate as many as I please. Especially if it’s in pursuit of my goals.”

A nasty sweat welled up on Miyo’s palms and on her back. She felt as though she were a frog being stared down by a snake.

This Usui was an enigma. The short time she’d spent with him was all she needed to be convinced of this.

Just as he’d said himself, Usui’s mannerisms were totally inconsistent. It was impossible to tell just what he was thinking or predict what he would do next.

He was chaos and contradiction given human form.

A click sounded from the gun Arata had hidden on his person. Miyo couldn't be sure, but she assumed that Kiyoka was also prepared to draw the sword that never left his side.

Yet Usui just shrugged and twisted his mouth into a smile, totally unconcerned by the pair's threatening posture.

"Oh, come now, what's the ominous attitude for? I just came here to introduce myself today. I have absolutely no intention of starting a fight."

"That I don't believe. Besides, you're already a wanted man."

"Don't be like that. You did rebuff my men, Commander Kudou. Isn't it my responsibility as their superior to come and introduce myself? As it happens, I also have a gift for you. I'm sure it'll make you amenable to cooperating with us."

"A gift?" Miyo murmured to herself. He definitely hadn't come to bring them a box of confections.

She felt a twinge of fear deep inside her mind; she couldn't think straight.

"A present?"

"That's right. That village you recently discovered was nothing but an expendable test site. Our bases are scattered all over the country, yet the military identified them in one fell swoop. Did the possibility of this being a trap not occur to you? I do hope those men of yours are safe and sound, Commander Kudou."

"Expendable test site," "identified them in one fell swoop,"…"trap." As one ominous word begot another, Miyo couldn't quite grasp what Usui was implying.

Conversely, Kiyoka's brows arched, and his lips quivered when he heard the statement.

“Are you trying to threaten me?”

“Exchanging gifts is just good business. See, here it comes.”

Usui pointed with his chin toward a small silhouette flying through the air. Upon closer inspection, it was a familiar made of white paper someone had sent their way.

Keeping his eyes locked on Usui, Kiyoka snatched the familiar and quickly scanned the short message written on its surface.

“What do you say? I thought it was pretty good news myself. I think it will make you inclined to cooperate with us.”

Kiyoka crushed the familiar in his grip and quietly clicked his tongue in response to Usui’s calm yet contentious conduct.

“None of that matters if I capture you here.”

“I’ll back you up, Major,” replied Arata to Kiyoka’s declaration.

When Miyo came back to her senses, her fiancé had already dashed forward at Usui. On top of that, Arata was openly aiming his pistol at his target, even though the station was filled with ordinary civilians.

…Something isn’t right.

Just then, she at last realized what was so bizarre about the scene.

Kiyoka and Arata must have already noticed it themselves. Not a single person passing through the station was looking at them

Despite the fact they were standing smack dab in the middle of a surging crowd…and despite the fact Arata had even drawn his gun, every other person here was walking past them without so much as a glance, as though they couldn’t see Miyo and the three men at all. Normally, a standoff like this would have caused a huge commotion.

Is this Usui’s Gift?

Either that, or a barrier that warded people's attention. She couldn't say herself.

At that moment, Usui's body seemed to turn transparent.

When Kiyoka attempted to grab hold of the man, his hand cut through the air and—

"Miyo, my dear daughter. I swear I'll come back for you later."

—a voice whispered eerily in her ear.

Somehow, Usui had gotten right next to her, even though both Kiyoka and Arata had been shielding her.

"……!"

"Miyo, don't move!"

The bullet leapt from Arata's gun with a dry bang, skimmed past Miyo's side, hit the ground behind her, and bounced away.

The man was nowhere to be found.

◇◇◇

Miyo squeezed her cold fingertips and glanced out the window of the automobile at the scenery flowing by.

I'm not really the Saimoris' daughter…?

She was terrified by Usui's insistence that he would "come back for her." Above all else, she couldn't help but wonder what the man's motives for claiming her as his daughter were.

She didn't want to believe it.

After all, if that was indeed the truth, it would've perfectly explained why she'd never been treated like a daughter in that household. That the agonizing period she'd spent unrecognized as

part of the family, the physical and mental anguish she'd endured, had all been justified.

And that wasn't the only thing that frightened her about the prospect of Naoshi Usui being her father…

Because the "present" from the man who claimed to be the founder of the Gifted Communion had turned out to be anything but.

A number of locations that the military identified as base camps for the Gifted Communion to be targeted in their simultaneous raid on the organization had exploded right as the troops broke in, going up in flames.

The casualties had been enormous. The men serving in Kiyoka's unit were no exception, of course.

So many were wounded, even Mr. Godou…

There was also the incident with the villagers at the Kudous' villa. The Gifted Communion had made them lose their minds and plunged them into terror.

She didn't want to even consider the possibility that the man responsible for harming so many people could be her own father. That was far harder for Miyo to accept than her past with the Saimoris.

Just imagining it soured her mood; she unconsciously clenched her fists tighter.

Their automobile proceeded smoothly through the almost deserted morning streets and passed through the gate to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's base.

"Let's go."

"Okay."

After parking the car, Miyo and Kiyoka stood side by side before stepping into the station.

Despite the early morning hour, the interior was packed with soldiers rushing here and there.

“Good morning.”

Miyo bowed to the soldiers as they greeted her.

She’d imagined they would have met her with curious stares, but whether it was because they knew about her relationship with Kiyoka or simply because they were too busy to care, she didn’t sense they were uncomfortable in the slightest.

“Miyo, you’re going to join in on this meeting we’re about to have.”

“Okay.”

“But before that…”

Kiyoka passed in front of the meeting room and casually opened a door with a more elaborate design than its counterparts.

“There’s someone I’d like to introduce to you first.”

“Introduce to me first…? Wait…”

She recalled hearing the shocking news that she would be assigned a personal guard, hand-picked from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, to protect her from Usui.

Miyo wanted to say that Kiyoka was overreacting, but when she thought back to Usui’s visit the other day, she couldn’t refuse.

On the other side of the door was a spacious room.

A large office desk sat in the back, and there was a table and sofa, too. Although the furnishings were as stunning as the ones in the reception area—a departure from the dreary décor found in the rest

of the station—the place was a mess, with mountains of documents piled everywhere.

There was still no sign of the person Kiyoka had mentioned inside.

“Sorry about the clutter. This is my office, where I do most of my work.”

“What…? Erm, should I be in here?”

Surprised, Miyo looked up at her fiancé’s face.

The military held a great deal of confidential information. There were definitely things here that Miyo wouldn’t be allowed to lay eyes on.

“Not a problem. You’re going to be sheltering here in this station from today onward…or at least that’s probably what we’ll decide during the meeting. If that’s the case, then I wouldn’t be able to hide anything.”

“Oh…really…”

“Yes. Sorry. I’m going to have to inconvenience you a bit until this Gifted Communion incident settles down.”

“It’s okay. I know that you’re doing this because you’re worried about me, Kiyoka.”

Naturally, she assumed that he wasn’t assigning her a guard attaché because of his personal feelings toward Miyo. His superior, Ookaito, was said to be participating in the meeting as well, and it was likely military policy to keep Miyo safe.

Nevertheless, when she looked at Kiyoka’s face, it was clear to her just how terribly worried he was for her.

“Take a seat for now. They should be here soon.”

Going along with his suggestion, she sat down on the sofa and took a deep breath. Enveloped in the softness of the sofa, the tension she

was carrying in her body from the stress of the situation lessened ever so slightly.

“Tired?”

“No, I just got here.”

She shook her head. At this, Kiyoka suddenly drew his beautiful face close to hers.

“You’re looking a little pale.”

“P-please, you’re exaggerating.”

Her cheeks instantly heated up, and she abruptly shrank back, nearly jumping out of her seat.

Miyo was physically fine. While her complexion could have been better, that was the fault of nerves and anxiety.

But no matter how much she wanted to tell Kiyoka this, she couldn’t get the words out of her mouth.

How embarrassing.

Positioned like this, her thoughts drifted to what had transpired at the villa the other day, and composure became impossible.

Unsure where to look, Miyo darted her eyes to and fro until Kiyoka furrowed his brows and laughed, putting some space between them.

“You’re being too self-conscious. Of course I’m not going to do anything funny while we’re at my workplace.”

“D-does that mean you will when we’re not here…?”

“Or at home, either.”

“Y-you’re being mean.”

Kiyoka was teasing her. Miyo brought both her hands up to hide her flushed cheeks and expressed her indignation.

Just as there was a lull in the conversation, someone rapped on the office door. The person they'd been waiting for had finally arrived.

Miyo fixed her posture, trying to cool the heat in her cheeks.

"Commander, it's Jinnouchi. May I come in?"

"Go ahead."

"Pardon me."

Opening the door and entering the office was someone dressed in a shapely military uniform.

A dashing…woman?

Perhaps because she was so used to Kiyoka's appearance, Miyo had thought Jinnouchi was a dainty, androgynous man at first glance. But this wasn't the case. Gallantly striding farther into the room, her ponytail fluttering behind her, was a woman around Miyo's age, with handsomely dignified features.

I thought there were only men in the military.

When Miyo cocked her head, she accidentally met eyes with Jinnouchi, who promptly replied with a smile.

Even as a woman herself, Miyo couldn't help being enchanted by the gorgeous woman. She wore the boorishly masculine military uniform without losing any of her feminine beauty, as if she was an actor in a theater troupe.

She'd gone to all that effort to cool her cheeks, but now they were burning for a different reason.

"Thanks for coming, Jinnouchi. Take a seat."

"Yes, sir."

Kiyoka motioned the woman he called Jinnouchi to the chair across from Miyo before he coolly sat himself down beside his fiancée.

“Sorry for calling you here from the old capital so suddenly.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s good to see you, Mr. Kudou.”

Now that she was face-to-face, the cheerfully smiling woman seemed surprisingly friendly, with a warm and gentle disposition.

“Miyo, this is Kaoruko Jinnouchi. Normally, she’s stationed with the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit in the old capital. I’ve asked her to come to fill the hole Godou’s left behind. She’ll be serving as your bodyguard going forward… Jinnouchi, this is my fiancée, Miyo Saimori.”

The woman straightened her posture and bowed.

“Kaoruko Jinnouchi. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Miyo Saimori. Likewise, the pleasure’s all mine.”

Though overpowered by her courtesy on top of her beauty, Miyo greeted her back.

Kaoruko smiled and extended out her hand.

“Um, would it be all right if I called you just Miyo?”

“Y-yes, go right ahead.”

“A wonderful name, for sure. I was wondering what Mr. Kudou’s fiancée would be like. It sort of makes sense to find out it’s someone gentle like yourself, Miyo.”

Kaoruko’s speech was unexpectedly much more eloquent and casual than her appearance suggested.

Miyo grabbed her outstretched hand and shook it. Though femininely small, it was also hard and calloused from gripping a sword. Nevertheless, it was warm.

…Thank goodness. She seems like a good person.

Miyo would have noticed if Kaoruko was trying to hide feelings of bitterness or animosity towards her.

But fortunately, she didn't pick up any unpleasantness in the other woman's tone. Kaoruko clearly wasn't a bad person. Miyo hoped she would be able to get along with her.

"Jinnouchi, I want you to guard Miyo."

At Kiyoka's words, Kaoruko's face tightened, and she nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure you're aware, but should you accept, know that any emergency will involve going up against the Gift-users of the Gifted Communion or Usui himself. Your life will be at risk."

"Not a problem. I understand the danger."

"Sorry. I had you come here to stand in for Godou, but…"

"I don't mind at all. It's more prudent to have her bodyguard be another woman anyway. Besides, that's just the sort of relationship we have—right, Commander?"

Miyo felt somewhat discomforted by her suggestive phrasing.

Kaoruko and Kiyoka's relationship.

Were they more than subordinate and superior, more than fellow members of the military? Kaoruko was from the old capital, which gave Miyo the impression that she wouldn't have chosen her words like that if they didn't have some kind of special connotation.

What did she mean? Miyo was torn between inquiring about Kaoruko's statement or letting it go.

I—I don't want to have this cloud hanging over me!

Miyo made up her mind and decided to ask.

"Um, and just what……sort of relationship do you two have?"

“Huh? Oh. The truth is, I was one of Mr. Kudou’s marriage candidates way back when.”

“What?”

Miyo fixed her eyes on Kaoruko’s attractive, smiling face. She was too shocked for words.

She obviously knew that many previous marriage candidates had tried to win over Kiyoka before her. And she was well aware that not a single one of them had ultimately remained at his side.

It was simply that she had never met one of these women in real life before and so had mostly forgotten all about them.

“Hey, don’t dig up the past,” Kiyouka snapped.

“Oh, sorry. It must not feel great to hear that, but don’t let it worry you.”

“Honestly, what were you thinking?” he chided.

“I’m sorry, really! I won’t bring it up again.”

“……”

Unsure of how to respond, Miyo could only sink into silence.

Kaoruko had said not to worry about it, but now that the truth was out there, she couldn’t do anything *but* worry. If Kaoruko and Kiyoka had actually gotten engaged, then Miyo’s opportunity would have never come.

Besides, they both seemed to be on fairly good terms even now. Maybe that meant…

Why am I getting carried away over this nonsense?

Kiyoka was engaged to Miyo. He cared for her and was faithful to her. That’s why it was impossible to think that just having Kaoruko around would change anything. She believed in him, didn’t she?

“I might not be as good as Mr. Kudou here, but I’ll try my hardest to protect you, Miyo.”

“R-right… Thank you.”

Though Miyo replied to Kaoruko with a smile, gray clouds still lingered in her heart.

The briefing time drew near, and the three of them moved to the meeting room.

Miyo was still so fixated on how Kaoruko had been one of Kiyoka’s marriage candidates that she didn’t really remember much of the conversation before that point.

Stop it, Miyo. You need to get your thoughts in order.

The top brass had specifically requested that she attend the meeting, so it was possible they would want her opinion or testimony on certain topics. She’d leave a horrible impression if they asked for her input on something when she had her head in the clouds.

They entered the meeting room, which was still mostly empty.

“Miyo, your seat’s here.”

She was shown to a chair in the back of the room, right next to Kiyoka’s own.

Today would be the Anti-Grotesquerie Unit’s first true meeting since Miyo, Kiyoka, and Arata’s chance encounter with Usui. They’d asked Miyo to be part of the proceedings since she was a concerned party. She’d also had direct contact with Usui, so they wanted to make sure she understood how they would be handling him going forward.

Normally, even if the situation at hand did concern outsiders, someone like her wouldn’t be so deeply involved in military proceedings.

In this case, however, Usui had sworn to Miyo that they would meet again, which led the unit to conclude that leaving her in the dark be more dangerous than not.

“Thank you.”

Miyo quietly took her seat.

Though she had been gung ho when they left the house, she felt unbearably out of place now that she was actually in the meeting room.

On top of that, the shock from earlier still lingered in her mind. If she didn’t focus, she’d find herself staring at Kaoruko, sitting a bit farther away from her, and the terrible visions that threatened to unfold in her mind.

I need to get myself together.

Kaoruko and Kiyoka’s past made her uneasy, but Miyo was the unit commander’s fiancée, so she couldn’t look disgraceful at his workplace in front of all his subordinates.

While she sat there waiting uncomfortably, the meeting attendees filed in one after the other.

Only those who held the position of squad leader or above within the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were allowed to participate in the day’s meeting. In other words, the toughest fighters in the meritocratic unit. The people gathered included both young men with normal physiques and men who were visibly brawny.

Nevertheless, no one stood out among the participants in the meeting as much as Kaoruko, the only woman here dressed in a military uniform.

“Thanks for coming, everyone.”

Last to enter the meeting room was the man who oversaw the entire unit, Ookaito. Everyone rose to their feet and bowed.

“At ease. Take your seats.”

Following his word, the participants returned to their chairs, and the meeting solemnly began.

There was still one empty seat. Miyo had heard Arata was summoned as a representative of the Usuba family, but there was no sign of him even though the meeting had already begun.

I’m a little worried, but I’m not in any position to bring it up.

Things would be fine as long as he hadn’t been involved in an accident on the way there or injured himself somehow. As these thoughts ran through her head, someone passed her the handout for the meeting.

Th-this is tough.

Miyo passed her eyes briefly over the documents, which were filled with so much specialized jargon that she could barely understand half of it. She would probably need Kiyoka to help get her up to speed later if the briefing didn’t clarify anything.

Once the materials were distributed, and everyone had skimmed the topics and agenda, Kiyoka began to speak.

“I’ve borrowed an individual from the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit in the old capital for the time being to help confront the Gifted Communion and replace missing personnel. Allow me to introduce her—Jinnouchi.”

“Yes, sir!”

Kaoruko’s cheerful, clear voice resounded throughout the room. Everyone turned their eyes to her as she stood up.

“This is Kaoruko Jinnouchi. As many of you know, she was stationed here until a few years ago.”

She stood at attention and bowed.

“Kaoruko Jinnouchi, reporting in. My unit commander decided it would be best for someone familiar with the imperial capital to lend their aid and singled me out to serve here. I’ll do my utmost to make up for Godou’s absence. I look forward to working with you all!”

Kaoruko’s introduction convinced Miyo.

If she had served in the capital, then she and Kiyoka must have worked together, so it was little wonder that she and Kiyoka would be friendly with each other.

Though Miyo could understand this intellectually, it was still hard to accept the answer. She found herself wanting to believe that the particularly close relationship they shared was because they had worked together, and not because she was once a marriage candidate.

No, no, no. Kiyoka is free to be friendly with whoever he wants in the first place.

It wouldn’t do to let herself be pointlessly suspicious of Kaoruko’s presence in Kiyoka’s life. She heaved a sigh in an attempt to prevent her thoughts from spiraling.

At any rate, she had heard that Godou’s absence would be keenly felt in the unit. Miyo didn’t necessarily have an accurate grasp of his capabilities, but given that he served as Kiyoka’s aide, he clearly had the strength to match.

Kaoruko must have been similarly outstanding as the woman who would be filling his shoes.

Miyo would be lying if she said she wasn’t a bit jealous.

“As for the duties Jinnouchi will be handling, we will be going over those later on. Next…”

Kaoruko returned to her seat, and the meeting moved to the next orders of business.

The explosions at the Gifted Communion's bases and the condition of the wounded. Military policy and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's strategy going forward. There was plenty of ground to cover.

After a short while, the topic finally shifted to the matter of Usui and his underlings. The man giving the report on the incident at the village was a squad leader of around thirty years old named Mukadeyama.

"We've investigated the individual that the commander fought with, the results of which can be found in the documents before you."

"…Someone from the Houjou family? But we should know the whereabouts of all the Gift-users in the country by now."

Miyo's eyes fell to the materials in front of her.

Gift-users were enormously powerful, so the government strictly surveilled their whereabouts. If any of them got involved in criminal activity, the country would swoop in to deal with them before it became a major incident.

Despite this, the Gift-user Kiyoka had squared off against during their time at his parents' villa, this Houjou fellow, had evaded the watchful eyes of the government. To make matters worse, he was a member of the Gifted Communion and had participated in their schemes. This should have been impossible.

Squad Leader Mukadeyama answered Kiyoka's question and continued his report.

"That element is particularly……bizarre, yes. We found no signs of negligence in the state's observational body. But for some reason, all records of the Hojous stopped a while ago. No one seemed to have found this suspicious, either."

Everyone in the room could only cock their heads in confusion at this revelation.

How exactly had the state lost track of a Gift-user they were supposedly keeping watch over, and how had no one found this situation suspicious?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any real way to answer that. This is everything I know.”

“Hrmm…”

Ookaito furrowed his brow and let out a heavy sigh.

Kiyoka, too, frowned at the incomprehensible report, and the other participants wore much the same expression themselves.

“It’s pertinent to consider Usui’s Gift as similar in nature to the Usubas’ Gifts… He is clearly meddling with people’s brains and psyches.”

Miyo abruptly lifted her head to look at her fiancé as he said this.

They still didn’t have a grasp on what sort of Gift Usui possessed. More importantly, the person she imagined who was called there to verify the information on the subject had yet to arrive.

“If Arata Tsuruki—er, Arata Usuba—was here, this would go a lot faster. Where is he?”

Ookaito knitted his brows as he asked this, causing a murmur to ripple through the meeting room.

The whispers exchanged between the participants reached Miyo’s ears: “I get it’s an order from Prince Takaihito, but to work together with an Usuba?” “The Usubas don’t deserve our trust.”

At that point, it was an open secret that the Usubas publicly used the name Tsuruki. That summer, when the emperor had stepped

down from the political stage in accordance with Prince Takaihito's wishes, the family's existence stopped being treated as a state secret.

There were still only a few people in the entire country who knew the truth, but among Gift-users, there were more who knew than those who didn't. The problem lay in the fact that the Usubas were unlike any other family who inherited supernatural abilities.

They had been tasked with watching over and controlling the nation's Gift-users. As such, other supernaturally inclined families were predisposed to distrust them.

While it was progress that the Usubas had come out in the open, other Gift-users still kept them at arm's length. That was simply the reality of the current situation.

"If he's not coming, then we'll just have to reach out to him on our end."

Right as those words left Kiyoka's mouth, the door to the meeting room opened, and in walked Arata, as if on cue.

"My apologies for being late."

"Took you long enough."

"Sorry. Things are a mess on our end as well. Not enough hands to go around."

"I understand you're busy, but it's still important to be on time. Please have a seat."

Getting his slightly ragged breathing under control, Arata took the only empty chair in the room, next to Kiyoka.

Arata must have heard people whispering slander about him as he approached his place, yet his composed expression never faltered.

Miyo peeked a glance at him, and her cousin responded with a subtle smile.

“Well then, since you took your time getting here, I’m assuming you have some results to share?”

“Yes, to some extent. I was able to confirm the nature of Usui’s supernatural ability.”

That comment shut everyone up.

Despite the murmurs of suspicion they had been directing at the Usubas moments ago, everyone listened carefully, making sure not to miss a single word of Arata’s report.

He glanced around the room and shrugged.

“That being said, I don’t think just knowing about his Gift will make anything easier. It’s an unbelievably dangerous ability, one that a man like him definitely shouldn’t be allowed to have at his disposal.”

An invisible tension ran through the hushed meeting room.

“Naoshi Usui… His Gift distorts the senses. Sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch… Any and all information that we pick up from our five senses and process in our minds is fair game for him to manipulate.”

“That’s absurd!”

One of the squad leaders slammed his fist on the table and shouted. Then others followed suit one after the other.

“I don’t believe it.”

“Impossible.”

“He’s beyond human.”

Arata looked out over the clamor with cold eyes. Meanwhile, Kiyoka was scowling, and Ookaito wore a pensive look on his face.

He distorts the senses…?

It was difficult to imagine just from the description, but having actually experienced it firsthand, Miyo heaved a defeated sigh.

Despite how bustling and noisy the interior of the train station had been, none of the passersby had even registered her and the others' presence. This explained why Usui had seemed to disappear and reappear again without the three of them noticing at the time, and also why the Houjou Gift-user had been able to evade the watchful eyes of the government.

In the end, the phenomenon she'd witnessed that day wasn't the product of a barrier, but a result of a supernatural ability.

What an absolutely terrifying power.

Arata continued to speak, maintaining his composure.

"Shouting about it won't change anything. Usui would have no trouble slipping into this very meeting undetected if he wanted. He could pass himself off as a completely different person, too."

A gasp echoed through the room.

Miyo shivered just imagining it. Fighting Usui meant that ultimately, one would be completely unable to trust any information gleaned from their own senses.

"Of course, that doesn't mean he can use such a tremendous power without restriction. In all likelihood, there's a limit to how many times he can use it a day, along with a limit to its range of effect."

"Still, how much of a weakness could those constraints really be? I'm not Gifted, so this isn't really something I can weigh in on, but it sounds like there's no way to avoid this battle with Usui—with the Gifted Communion—from proving difficult."

The room fell silent at Ookaito's comment, before Kiyoka offered a reply.

“That’s a valid point, Major General. We need to uncover his weakness and prepare to work around it. But to accomplish that, we first need to consider what the Gifted Communion and Naoshi Usui’s objectives are.”

“Hm, that’s right. Kiyoka, did Houjou tell you anything about these goals of theirs when you faced off against him?”

“Yes.”

Kiyoka then proceeded to summarize the events that had transpired during their visit to his parents’ villa.

All of this was information had already been shared within the unit, but the participants listened with solemn faces at his fresh account, now with additional emphasis placed on the Gifted Communion’s end goal.

“Forcing Grotesqueries to possess people and awaken supernatural abilities in them… We haven’t been able to confirm if this aim of theirs is actually possible.”

Kiyoka continued his straightforward explanation.

To begin with, Grotesqueries were beings that both did and did not take physical form. While Gift-users could generally see them and touch them, the same wasn’t true for the average citizen.

In which case, how was the Gifted Communion capturing them?

They would need to force the Grotesqueries to possess some living creature, human or otherwise, thereby giving them physical form.

However, there were a number of factors preventing the government from verifying efficacy of the Gifted Communion’s methods. Not only were the existence of Gifts a state secret, for instance, but the tests they would need to perform to awaken someone’s latent Gifts were also legally dubious.

Therefore, ascertaining if the Gifted Communion's claims were true or not and getting one step ahead of them would present a major challenge going forward.

"Permission to speak, Commander."

"Go ahead."

Kiyoka nodded at Squad Leader Mukadeyama's raised hand.

"Even if it's possible to turn regular citizens into Gift-users, what will that accomplish? According to your report, sir, it sounds like the founder—like Naoshi Usui wants to create a new world and rule it as its king. If that's the case, I think it'd be faster if he simply used his Gift to achieve his ends without giving supernatural powers to the common citizenry."

Mukadeyama's opinion was reasonable. Gift-users were human, and while they could never become gods, they far outstripped the average person in every respect.

Needless to say, supernatural abilities generally enhanced one's body, making it resistant to injuries and disease. Gift-users' superior physical abilities put them on a completely different level than ordinary individuals. Going one step further, the Usubas' Gift managed to surpass these very same Gift-users.

Miyo had gained this knowledge under the tutelage of Arata and Kiyoka's older sister Hazuki.

"Usui's plan suggests how much confidence he has in his own power, in the Usubas' Gift. Or maybe it's less confidence, and more so the pride of having an ability that dominates normal Gift-users. Therefore…"

Kiyoka turned to Miyo. Following his lead, all eyes in the meeting room coalesced together on her, and she went stiff with anxiety.

“If this is indeed the principle behind Usui’s actions, then there’s no doubt he wants to get his hands on the power of Dream Sight.”

“It’s fair to say that Dream Sight is everything to the Usubas. There are even some among our relatives who revere its wielder like a god. I imagine that’s no different for a branch family like the Usuis.”

Arata expanded on Kiyoka’s statement before the commander continued.

“There’s no question he’ll be after the current wielder of Dream Sight, Miyo Saimori here. We won’t even have to try setting Usui up. Our job will be to keep her safe and to engage the enemy when they make their move. That’s why our unit will focus both on protecting her and confronting the Gifted Communion going forward.”

“You’re talking about ‘protecting her,’ Commander, but what are we specifically supposed to be doing?” Mukadeyama asked.

“Hrm. Kiyoka, I get that the defenses around your house might be flawless, but…”

Taking up the squad leader’s question, Ookaito visibly pondered the answer as he rubbed his chin.

“We’re facing off against a powerful opponent. Even a skilled bodyguard will just buy time for Miyo at best. If anything happens, you’ll have to go rushing over to her side no matter what, right?”

“I’d like Miyo to come here every day starting tomorrow.”

Kiyoka had anticipated that this would be Ookaito’s opinion. He’d laid out the exact flow of the conversation for Miyo ahead of time.

Arata shrugged and chimed in.

“I can’t think of anything that’d bring more peace of mind than having Miyo at the major’s side all day. I intend on acting as her guard as well, but with my family’s duties on my plate, I doubt I’ll be able to be consistent about it.”

“And you’re all right with this?”

Miyo looked up at Ookaito when he asked her this.

She had been mulling the arrangement over ever since Kiyoka had laid things out for her in his office earlier.

If, given the circumstances, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit didn’t mind having a civilian like Miyo in a military facility, what she was truly worried about was getting in the way of Kiyoka’s work.

“Just be honest about what you want to do. And you being here won’t distract me from my duties. Besides, with how the situation’s played out, there isn’t any other job more important than keeping you safe,” Kiyoka reassured her, as if reading her mind.

Miyo nodded.

“Yes, if I am allowed to stay here then that……will put me at ease, too.”

“That settles it, then,” Ookaito said, standing up from his chair. “From today onward, Miyo Saimori, the assumed target of Naoshi Usui, will be under the protection of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit. I’ll get approval on this from above. Are there any objections?”

No one replied to their superior’s question. After a few moments, Miyo could hear murmurs of “no objections” from around the room.

“Then do what you need to do to prepare yourselves for the fight against the Gifted Communion. Meeting adjourned.”

◇◇◇

Arata left the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, striding through the streets of the imperial capital.

At this rate, beating Usui will be absolutely impossible.

His expression clouded into a stern grimace.

Researching Usui's power at the Usuba estate had convinced him. Naoshi Usui was powerful. Far, far more powerful than Arata.

The Usuis may have been a branch family, but Usui's generation, between himself and Sumi Usuba, had produced many more Usuba Gift-users than there were now—and brilliant ones at that.

Only an Usuba Gift-user would be able to stop another Usuba Gift-user. But there wasn't anyone capable of going toe-to-toe with Usui at the moment. Even Arata was no match for him.

On the other hand, even a non-Usuba with a Gift on par with Kiyoka's could face off against Usui with the right strategy, but the people who fulfilled this criterion were few and far between. On top of that, the Gifted Communion also had the Houjous on their side, and Arata wasn't sure how many other people with supernatural abilities were at Usui's command.

As things stood now, Arata and the company would be doomed if they fought against the Gifted Communion.

…He's the shame of the Usuba family.

The thought had been on his mind ever since he'd heard the name Naoshi Usui—that the Usubas were responsible for all of this.

They were guilty of the crime of failing to cull a dangerous element in their ranks. The crime of giving up on tailing someone who had broken away from the family.

There was no excuse. While pretentiously bragging about being disciplined under the rules that once governed the family, the Usubas had pretended like Usui had never existed, doing their hardest to forget about him. This present situation was the end result.

In the worst-case scenario, the Usuba family will be protected as long as Miyo remains unharmed.

Just as Usui had his sights on Miyo, Arata needed to protect Miyo through everything, no matter what. Even if that meant leaving her side.

Buffeted by the cold wind, Arata stopped and closed his eyes.

He was sure that his grandfather, Yoshirou, would tell him he bore no responsibility for letting Usui run loose. Arata may have been shouldering the weight of the Usubas going forward, but he didn't have the power to change the past.

Despite that, as the person protecting this generation's Dream Sight Medium…there were things Arata had to do, even if it meant giving something up in exchange.

Usui would die by his hands, even if he had to lay down his life in the process.

Arata opened up his eyes and stared down at his palm.

Come what may, he would find a chink in the Gifted Communion's armor, a weakness of Naoshi Usui, and defeat them. He could leave behind a brand-new Usuba family, free from any lingering danger.

Perhaps his life as an Usuba Gift-user had all been leading up to this.

"Though it's still a bit irritating."

There was no danger in leaving Miyo in Kiyoka's hands. She would be fine without him nearby for a little while.

During that time, he needed to search for a way to bring Usui down then crush him as fast as possible.

Letting out a white cloud of breath, Arata looked straight out in front of him and continued on through the wintery city streets.

⚜ *CHAPTER 2* ⚜

Her First Friend

She dreamed for the first time in a long while.

In her vision, she found herself standing before an unfamiliar traditional wood-frame house.

"C'mon, Naoshi. I heard you got in another fight, is that right?"

A young woman's voice echoed from the garden, bathed in warm sunlight.

It was a voice she knew well. The voice of her mother, Sumi Saimori.

Compared to her memory of it, however, it was a little livelier and more cheerful. She surmised the dream was from a time before her mother wedded into the Saimori family.

Miyo looked around and spied a young man standing in the shade of a verdant tree, shrugging his shoulders and smiling.

"The other guy started it. I was just defending myself."

"Liar. If that's true, then why did your opponent end up in the hospital while you don't even have a scratch on you?"

Looking down on the man from the veranda, interrogating him with a hand on her hip, was indeed Sumi as a young girl.

Despite this, she seemed different than the versions of her mother who had shown up in her dreams before.

This Sumi appeared to be somewhere in her early teens. Her beautiful black hair swayed behind her as she puffed out her cheeks, brimming with sprightly vigor.

She was a far cry from how her mother looked in Miyo's dreams of the Saimori house, where her expression was always forlorn and sad.

"I can't pull one over on you, Sumi. But I swear, it was the other guy who picked the fight and threw the first punch."

"…And you responded with 'excessive self-defense.' Ever heard of it?"

*"*Hah-hah-hah-hah. *Can't say I have."*

Miyo recognized the young man attempting to smooth things over with his smile. It was only just recently that he had made Miyo's blood run cold.

Naoshi Usui.

Though he was dressed like a student, wearing a *kimono* over a white shirt and *hakama* pants, his round glasses—and the dangerous gleam in the eyes behind them—were the same in the past as the present.

Or maybe not… He's a little less scary than he is now.

Miyo superimposed Usui's face from a few days prior onto the young man standing a few feet away from her.

As he looked up from the garden to Sumi on the veranda, the man narrowed his eyes with affection for her

"Don't try worming your way out of this. How many times have I told you that you shouldn't use violence?"

"I just can't help it when I lose my temper, honest. I'll be careful next time. I'll try to keep the other guy out of the hospital."

"Come on, now. I'm not telling you to go easier on people, I'm saying to stop beating them up in the first place! Understand?"

"I get it, I get it, Your Highness."

"Sheesh, it's always flattery with you!"

Sumi let out a sigh before she began to giggle, as if at a loss about how to deal with the young man.

Their exchange was friendly and peaceful, just like the sort of back-and-forth any normal girl and boy their age would have.

A short-lived memory of warm and gentle days gone by.

Before her was a run-of-the-mill scene of two young people's daily lives. So ordinary she could cry.

She keenly sensed Usui's love for Sumi, and the love Sumi felt for him in return.

Why was her power of Dream Sight showing her this memory? Her Gift wasn't going haywire, which meant that somewhere deep down, Miyo herself wished to know more about the past.

Were the two of them lovers?

Without anyone to answer her question, she tried to guess the truth herself, sending only the worst possibilities imaginable flittering through her mind.

What if Naoshi Usui *was* her real father?

What if her mother and Usui had been in love with each other, only to be ripped apart by Sumi's politically arranged marriage?

What am I supposed to do?

As Usui's daughter, did she need to atone for the crimes he had committed? Or apologize in her mother's stead to the Saimoris for deceiving them this whole time?

Would the fact that she didn't want to do either ultimately become a sin of her own?

Overflowing with inconsolable feelings, Miyo covered her face with both of her hands.

“Don’t worry, Sumi. I’ll always protect you, and everything you care about… As long as you stay by my side.”

Her dream came to an end, closing with a voice from Usui that was so gentle, it was totally incomparable to the voice she had heard several days prior.

The day after the meeting.

From today onward, Miyo would be spending the whole day inside the walls of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit with Kiyoka.

Generally speaking, she would be leaving the house in the morning together with Kiyoka, and come evening, they would return home together. Although Kaoruko was acting as her bodyguard, Miyo’s safety came above all else, so her world had gotten smaller.

In other words, she would be spending day and night by her fiancé’s side. And that was…

Unbearable.

Eating breakfast together at home like always and departing for the station had all been fine.

But now that she had met up with Kaoruko and they were passing the time on the couch in Kiyoka’s office, she found herself with nothing to do.

Miyo looked over to the desk and saw Kiyoka staring sternly at the documents in front of him.

Just sitting at her fiancé’s side as he worked diligently and waiting until he was finished for the day like this was awkward and uncomfortable.

But I can’t simply move around willy-nilly, either.

Though she may have wanted to help, things weren’t that simple. On top of needing protection, Miyo was a civilian. She’d cause

trouble for others if she let her whims carry her throughout the facility.

"Oh, I'll go make some tea."

Kaoruko smiled cheerfully as she raised her hand up and left the room.

Miyo wanted to offer to prepare the tea herself, but she didn't know where anything was in the station. She was envious of how accustomed Kaoruko was to the place.

It was depressing to sit there idly, being protected and unable to do anything to help.

I'm so pathetic…

While Miyo fretted in anguish, Kaoruko quickly returned with a tray in hand.

"I'm back!"

Kaoruko headed straight for Kiyoka's desk and placed a cup down on it.

"Commander, you preferred coffee, right?"

"…Right, thanks. I'm shocked you remember."

Kiyoka furrowed his brow for an instant before breaking into a smile. It slightly surprised Miyo to see him grin while working.

Kaoruko looked happy as well.

"Oh please. I remember everything about you, Commander."

"Listen, you……"

She looked pretty as she flashed him an impish smile. While Kaoruko wasn't earning any praise for teasing her superior, Miyo didn't think Kiyoka was quite as upset as he was letting on.

Both of them really do get on well together.

The more she thought about it, the more Miyo realized that she knew almost nothing about how Kiyoka behaved at work.

She had no idea that he drank coffee at all. At home it was nothing but green tea, and Miyo hadn't the slightest inkling about how to brew a fancy, stylish drink like coffee.

It hadn't even been a year since Miyo first met Kiyoka that spring.

Having worked together with him, Kaoruko surely must have known more about Kiyoka than Miyo did.

That was what arranged marriage essentially was in the first place. You were introduced to a potential partner you really didn't know much about, then got married. As people spent time with their spouses, they steadily learned more and more about each other.

Even though she understood this intellectually, being confronted with this difference right before her eyes clouded her heart.

"Here you go, Miyo."

"Th-thank you."

Faking a smile to conceal her murky emotions, Miyo accepted the teacup from Kaoruko.

This wasn't going to do—this woman was being so amicable with her, and Miyo couldn't let her gloomy look dampen the atmosphere.

Kiyoka himself trusted Kaoruko, which was obviously why he'd entrusted her with guarding Miyo. Above all else, he'd decided on this arrangement with Miyo's welfare in mind.

There wasn't anything for her to be displeased about.

I need to search for something that I can do.

Though Miyo couldn't handle military-related work, she ought to be able to take care of odd jobs or chores instead—even if it was just serving tea or giving shoulder massages. As long as she remained

inside the station, people would be watching her and Kiyoka could immediately come running to her side, so she'd be totally safe… At least she thought so.

Mentally firing herself up, Miyo drained her tea and rose to her feet.

"U-um, excuse me, Kiyoka?"

"What is it?"

She continued speaking, undaunted by Kiyoka, who replied to her without lifting his eyes from his desk.

"Please give me some work to do."

Miyo stared hard into his eyes after he lifted his head up in surprise. Then he sighed and laid down his fountain pen.

"No."

"Wh-why not?"

"It's dangerous."

"But—"

"No buts. Usui might be after you at this very moment, you know."

While Kiyoka's tone wasn't harsh, hearing him lay this out left Miyo at a loss for words.

She was utterly in the dark about the current security situation, leaving her no option but to defer to the expert in these matters.

But if she backed down now, she would wind up sitting there like a mere decorative object.

"I-is there really nothing I can do?"

"You're really always looking to work, aren't you? If anything, you're usually too hard on yourself, so I wish you'd take this opportunity to relax a bit."

“R-relax……”

No other word troubled her as much as this one.

Miyo found taking it easy much more difficult than continuing to push herself.

“You even worked yourself to the bone on our trip to the villa, didn’t you?”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with this situation…”

“You’ve stopped listening to what I say lately, you know that?”

Kiyoka pouted, and Miyo lost the power to keep up her best protests.

It wasn’t that she wanted to work, exactly.

Until very recently, the concept of “free time” had been foreign to her. That was why being told to do as she pleased upset her.

The way she saw it, working was exponentially more preferrable than sitting around doing nothing. Besides—

“But I want to do something. I’ve got Usuba blood in my veins, too.”

It wasn’t about the possibility Usui might be her real father, or about doing something to stop the man himself.

The Usubas—her grandfather Yoshirou and Arata—had acknowledged her as family. She couldn’t turn a blind eye to Usui, who was also connected to the Usubas, like it didn’t concern her.

Miyo also felt she had some responsibility to bear as a blood relative, and she actively wanted to share that responsibility.

“Still, though.”

“C’mon, Commander, why not? Miyo will be safe and sound with me around!” Kaoruko confidently declared, pounding her chest with her fist.

“Miss Jinnouchi.”

With another member of the military on her side, Miyo was sure Kiyoka would allow her to work. Little did she know that she’d been too hasty to let relief wash over her.

“Jinnouchi, you’re not thinking carefully about this. This is Naoshi Usui we’re dealing with. It doesn’t matter how skilled or capable you are when you’re up against him. Let your guard down, and he’ll take your life in an instant.”

Kiyoka narrowed his eyes into a pointed glare, but Kaoruko glared right back at him, undaunted.

“I *am* thinking carefully about this. I just feel like forcing the person we need to guard to sit and bear with it isn’t really ‘protecting’ her. At the very least, that’s not really what I think ‘bodyguard duty,’ is about.”

“…What an audacious thing to say.”

“Despite what you may think, in the old capital, I’m still a remarkable military woman. I’ve been training myself every day, whether I want to or not.”

“Please, Kiyoka. I won’t cause you any trouble. I’ll be sure to listen to Jinnouchi’s orders, and I won’t leave the station. Please.”

Miyo fervently advocated for herself, prompting Kiyoka to let out another sigh of resignation.

“*Haah*. Fine, if you insist. Still, I can’t let you get involved in any military affairs. It’ll truly be nothing but odd jobs and chores. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, I don’t mind.”

Hearing Miyo's unequivocal response, Kiyoka brought his hand up to his forehead in exasperation.

His reaction suggested to Miyo that she was forcing unneeded hassle onto him. And that was probably true.

Just then, her enthusiasm withered, and the guilt pushed her toward retracting her request.

"You're overthinking things again, aren't you, Miyo?"

"Huh?"

She jerked her shoulders suddenly as Kiyoka instantly picked up on the feelings in her heart.

At this point, the way Miyo's train of thought would continue to spiral in the worst possible direction had become a habit of hers. After all, if she anticipated things going badly from the start, then she would be able to get through whatever life threw at her with the least amount of pain.

But Kiyoka was well aware of this, so he simply smiled at his fiancée.

"Miyo."

"Y-yes?"

"I know I may not look it, but I believe I'm capable of granting an indulgence or two from my fiancée. Don't worry about it."

The words weren't anything special. They were surely a common sentiment between friendly spouses-to-be.

Yet that didn't stop Miyo from feeling like her face was going to burst into flames.

It was a half-and-half split—partly because she was embarrassed to hear him call her request "an indulgence," and also because she

could clearly tell from Kiyoka's smile that he found her lovely and endearing.

Had he always been this sweet?

Whatever the case, her heart couldn't take it. Miyo averted her eyes as she grew dizzy.

"U-um, okay. Thank you…," she managed to reply in between her short breaths, to which Kiyoka nodded with a look of satisfaction.

"However, before getting to any work or the like, you'll need to learn the layout of the building. How about you try looking around for today?"

"Oh, in that case, I can serve as her guide while I'm guarding her."

Kaoruko energetically volunteered to lend a hand, and this time, approval came immediately.

"Good point. I'll leave it to you."

"Thank you for your help, Miss Jinnouchi."

"Leave it to me! I'll give you the top-to-bottom tour."

That was how Miyo ended up looking around the station together with her bodyguard Kaoruko.

However, when it came time for them to leave the office, Kiyoka left them with a nagging warning.

"I'm going to be here working, so be sure to call me if anything happens, got it?"

"I will."

"Make absolutely sure you don't step outside the station compound. Bodyguard or not, you can't afford to let down your guard."

"I won't."

“U-uhh, Commander?”

“If the men say anything to you, just ignore them. A hello’s good enough. Got it?”

“I understand.”

“On that point, if any one of them say anything rude to you, run away and come report it to me imm—”

“C-Commander! Enough, before we run out of time for the tour.”

Her patience for Kiyoka’s unending stream of safety precautions finally wearing thin, Kaoruko interjected and shot him a look of exasperation.

He looked slightly peeved at being cut off by one of his subordinates.

“These are all points that need going over, Jinnouchi.”

“Yes, yes, believe me, you’ve made your point loud and clear. I’ll be right by Miyo’s side making sure she’s safe, too. Right?”

Kaoruko glanced at Miyo for approval, and she nodded.

Every once and a while, Kiyoka could be a big worrywart. Miyo clearly understood that Usui was dangerous, and while she was happy to have her fiancé worry over her safety so much, she wasn’t a child. She felt just the slightest bit perturbed at being told what to do in such fine detail.

“…All right. Just make sure you’re extra careful while you’re out and about.”

He patted Miyo’s head with the palm of his large head.

Despite the fact he was treating her like a child, Miyo felt her face flush once again.

“I will. Thank you, Kiyoka.”

“Of course.”

Too embarrassed to lift her head, Miyo departed the office together with Kaoruko.

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Kiyoka let out a tiny sigh as he watched his departing fiancée and subordinate close the door behind them.

…What exactly is it that I want to do?

He had always held affection for Miyo—he thought.

He’d make sure to protect his fiancée, who bore deep scars, and to treat her with care. These feelings had remained consistent from when he’d first met her to now, when he’d spent more time with her.

However, this didn’t necessarily mean he had a felt a romantic sense of “love” for her from the start.

It’s shameful it took hearing that from the old man for me to realize it, though.

Now that he had been told of love, and awakened to it himself, Kiyoka couldn’t keep the feelings teeming in his chest out of his mind.

Leaning deeper into his chair, he let his eyes fall on the surface of his desk.

He would treasure Miyo for as long as he lived. His mind had been made up from the start, yet now there was so much more he wanted from her.

He didn’t want to ask that she’d reciprocate these same feelings.

Kiyoka simply wanted to cherish her, to make sure she never cried or got hurt again. He didn't want to get her in harm's way. In fact, he wanted her to always be within his sights, never leaving his side.

"……"

A terribly dangerous thought. What in the world was he thinking? Shame suddenly welled up inside him, and he stared into the air.

Day by day, Miyo was growing so much that she scarcely resembled the woman she had been.

Anyone who saw her would agree that she was a splendid noblewoman, and she could conduct herself as one in front of anybody. Both she and Kiyoka had wanted this. And yet.

There was a part of him inside that longed for her to stay put, to never move from his side. A part of him thought he would be at peace if he shut her away in a place where neither Usui nor anyone else could touch her.

Utter nonsense… I just want to make things easier for myself. Disgraceful.

Nevertheless, every time he saw her standing firm, desperately trying to suppress the terror she felt from Usui's presence and declarations, he would ponder what he could do to protect her from any kind of fear or sadness for good.

Kiyoka shook his head, chasing the terrible thoughts from his mind.

In any event, Miyo was changing. She was deftly interacting with Kaoruko, even though they had only just met. She may have been his fiancée, but he had no right to dictate her every move.

That was why agreeing to her wishes had been the right call.

I need to capture Usui come springtime, no matter what.

To spare Miyo any more pain, it was all the more vital that he dealt with Usui and the Gifted Communion as soon as possible.

Kiyoka turned his eyes to the documents in his hand.

Was Usui actually Miyo's real father? If this turned out to be true, it would flip everything upside down.

Going off the results of his investigation, it was likeliest that Miyo's father was Shinichi Saimori, based on when Miyo was born and when Sumi Usuba was officially married. However, the findings weren't indisputable. He couldn't definitively rule out the possibility that Sumi Usuba had met with Usui after she'd gotten married.

If Usui was Miyo's real father, then he could use his parental authority to manipulate her. On the other hand, even if he was only claiming her as his daughter for some ulterior motive, it was evidence of just how much he wanted her for himself.

Whatever the truth was, it was impossible to prevent her from getting involved in the situation.

What am I supposed to do?

What method was there to confront Usui and capture him while also preventing Miyo from being put in danger as much as possible?

Kiyoka sunk in his seat, deep in his thoughts and with no answer in sight.

◇◇◇

She advanced through the corridor with a spring in her step.

Kaoruko let out a laugh behind Miyo, walking as if she was fleeing Kiyoka's presence.

"So that's how the commander treats his fiancée, huh. I'm surprised."

"…He must act a lot different when he's working. "

Coming to a halt, Miyo tried to cool the flush in her cheeks while she turned around and mumbled.

"That's a given. The commander's usually very strict on both himself and others."

"Even with you, Miss Jinnouchi? Um, you were……you were also one of Kiyoka's potential marriage candidates, right?"

She hadn't really wanted to ask the question, but her curiosity had brought it tumbling out of her mouth.

I'm so stupid.

If Kaoruko replied saying he was strict with her, then Miyo would end up imagining them working together, but if she replied with the opposite, it would only agonize her to learn that she had been special to Kiyoka.

She shouldn't have asked something so foolish.

Miyo couldn't tell if Kaoruko had picked up on her feelings or not. She laughed off the question nonchalantly.

"He never pampered me like that. I was truly surprised to witness that exchange just now. That's the first time I've seen *the* Major Kudou look all out of sorts, and that's not even getting into the excessive warnings he gave. I'm *this* close to chiming in to ask what exactly happened in the few years since I last saw him."

She looked radiant as she chuckled jovially with a hand on the back of her head.

"Is that so?"

"Sure is. Though, I know very well that the commander is kind, despite how strict he is."

Kaoruko's brief, gentle expression stung in Miyo's chest.

After hearing that Kaoruko, too, had picked up on Kiyoka's kindness, she couldn't bear to look the woman straight in the eye.

The conversation trailed off, and the two silently started walking down the hall again.

"Oh, right," Kaoruko said, clapping her hands together. "There's something I've been wanting to say to you, Miyo."

"What would that be?"

Walking side by side, Miyo looked up at Kaoruko, who was tall for a woman. She looked back at Miyo with eyes full of anticipation.

"The truth is, you and I are actually pretty close in age. I'm twenty."

"Oh…yes. We are close, then."

Miyo would turn twenty in the new year. That would make Kaoruko a year older than her.

She thought about it for a moment and realized she hadn't actually met many other women close to her in age.

No matter how deeply she searched through her memories, the most she could come up with was the kids she'd met when she attended elementary school, a few servants at her previous home, and her stepsister.

Meeting Kaoruko and conversing with her like this was a nigh unprecedented occasion.

"I think the two of us actually have a lot in common. We're both still unmarried at our age, we're Gift-users. And pretty, to boot."

Miyo chuckled quietly, infected by Kaoruko's comedic remark.

She didn't consider herself pretty at all, but the joking compliment didn't have any hint of nastiness to it. In all honesty, she was happy and amused to hear it.

“So, umm… What I actually want to say is, basically… Well, I sort of thought that the two of us could became good friends,” Kaoruko said

“Friends?”

“Yeah. We’ll be going around together for a good chunk of the day for the foreseeable future, for one, and it seems like we could get on well together, so I thought an easygoing relationship would let us both be a bit more relaxed around each other.”

“…Yes, I suppose.”

“That and, I actually don’t have many friends. It’d make me really happy to get to know you, Miyo. You’d be helping me out a lot, so what do you say?”

Kaoruko stopped and held out her hand with a smile, and Miyo, for the briefest moment, hesitated to take it.

Interested or not, Miyo had never had a friend before. She didn’t have any idea about what specifically she needed to do for the two of them to be considered compatriots.

Nevertheless, her hesitation lasted but a few seconds.

Miyo timidly stretched out her hand and took hold of Kaoruko’s.

“If you’re really fine with someone like me, then…I look forward to our friendship.”

“All right! Thank you, Miyo. I’m sure we’ll hit it off!”

Seeing Kaoruko’s genuine glee at her answer—she was on the verge of jumping for joy—made Miyo feel like she had made the right choice.

She found it charming how Kaoruko could cut a handsome and dignified figure the one moment, only to act cheerful and friendly the next.

“In that case, I can ditch the stuffy formalities, right? You can talk to me like you normally would, too, Miyo, I don’t mind! Also, please call me Kaoruko instead of Jinnouchi.”

Miyo nodded, feeling overpowered by the woman as she brought her beautiful face close to hers and took both of Miyo’s hands in her own.

She had never really considered word choices or formality before. From a hierarchical standpoint, despite Miyo’s betrothal to Kiyoka, the lowly status of her family would place her far below Kaoruko. Besides, she was a normal civilian who was uninvolved with the military.

While Kaoruko may have been in charge of protecting Miyo, that didn’t make Miyo anymore distinguished or important.

“Seriously?! Thanks. Phew, I’m sooo glad you didn’t turn me down. You’re sweet, Miyo.”

“Not at all. There was never any sort of hierarchy between us to begin with… But, um, as for using your first name…”

“Ah, is it hard to say?”

“That’s…not exactly it.”

“I’d really prefer Kaoruko. Truth is, I’m not a big fan of being called by my last name.”

“Huh? Why, um, is that?”

Jinnouchi was a splendid family name to have. Normally not the type of name someone would dislike.

Miyo cocked her head in confusion, and Kaoruko smiled awkwardly and scratched her cheek.

“The last name Jinnouchi… It’s kind of stiff, or a little pompous, don’t you think?”

“Really?”

Miyo agreed that the characters in her name weren’t very charming or cute. Kaoruko had a very gallant outward appearance, so Miyo was a bit surprised to learn that she would have preferred something more feminine and endearing.

Sensing that Miyo had been convinced, the uniformed beauty continued on, appearing a bit impatient.

“A-anyway, just call me Kaoruko, okay?”

“Okay.”

Kaoruko let out a sigh of relief at Miyo’s nod before urging her forward.

“C’mon, let’s go!”

Continuing down the loudly creaking wood corridor, the two women came to a door labeled Kitchenette. This was apparently the first stop on their tour.

“Now then, Miyo. First, we have the kitchenette here, where……”

Leaping into her role as Miyo’s guide, Kaoruko cheerily opened up the door halfway before her voice went silent mid-sentence. She froze, standing stock-still in a daze.

Growing worried about what happened, Miyo peered into the kitchenette as well.

Oh my……

The room was dimly lit, and a cold dampness hung in its stagnant air. Upon casting her eyes about the room more closely, she found it was in a horrible state. Things were scattered all over the place, and it was so messy there was just barely enough room on the ground to place your feet.

However, Miyo only got a glimpse of the room for the briefest of moments.

Kaoruko violently slammed the door shut. Then she turned to face Miyo, her lips stretched into a taut smile, and gave a shockingly monotone reply.

“Awww! I forgot. We can’t use the kitchenette right now!”

How on earth could it be unusable?

There was a bare-bones kitchen and a small cafeteria inside the station, so while you could theoretically brew coffee and tea over there, Kaoruko herself had made some tea just a few minutes ago. She couldn’t have just forgotten about the state of the kitchenette.

Miyo did have to agree that the horrible mess she’d briefly glimpsed would make the place difficult to use, though.

“Whoopsie, not much help if I’m introducing you to facilities you can’t use, now is there? *Ah-hah-hah…*”

Miyo stared hard at Kaoruko as she continued to speak in a strained monotone, purposefully avoiding her gaze.

A few seconds passed in total silence.

Resigning herself to the situation, Kaoruko then asked, “Did you see?”

Miyo nodded hesitantly.

“…Yes. I saw it.”

Miyo could understand that the wretched condition of the room wasn’t exactly something to show other people.

Kaoruko feebly frowned as she opened the door once again.

“If you’ll allow me to give somewhat of an explanation, the military’s basically a boys’ club, so a lot of areas don’t end up getting the attention they need.”

This station was filled with nothing but men.

Although they ostensibly took turns handling the cleaning and laundry, many of them were likely unaccustomed to these chores. Given that this was a military facility that housed confidential information, it would also be difficult to hire someone from outside the military to handle them.

Entrusting the cleaning to new recruits or trainees wouldn’t work, either, as the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was always understaffed and wanted to utilize the fighting strength of any fresh faces right away, which prevented them from attending to any chores.

“I-it’s quite incredible, really.”

Miyo took another peek inside and discovered that the kitchenette was practically in a state of ruin.

It looked like you could still boil water and prepare tea here, at least, but the dust and the mold she saw did not speak highly of the room’s current level of sanitation.

Kaoruko heaved a sigh and closed the door again, as if to pretend she hadn’t seen anything.

“I get the feeling they haven’t cleaned it once since I was last stationed here.”

“Um, and just how long ago was that…?”

“Hmmm, around four, five years ago?”

The amount of time was far more horrifying than Miyo could’ve imagined.

Over those long years, the soldiers must have cleaned the kitchenette just barely enough to keep it usable, until it finally reached its current state. Miyo wished she hadn't learned the truth.

She unconsciously brought her hand to her mouth in shock, causing Kaoruko to slump her shoulders.

"…Anyway, I definitely can't let you see any more of that than you have to, so let's keep going."

"Okay."

As she nodded, Miyo considered volunteering to clean the place before stopping herself.

She was still getting shown around at the moment, and ultimately, she couldn't do anything without going back to Kiyoka's office and asking him about it first.

"Now then, next we'll goooo……this way."

Miyo was having a lot more fun on Kaoruko's tour than she'd expected.

After the kitchenette came the office and records room, followed by the courtyard, main kitchen, and the cafeteria. Looking inside the locker room and the storehouse was a step too far, of course, but Kaoruko took a brief peek in both places before shouting, "Filthy!" so they had to be in a similar state as the kitchenette.

Conversely, while the cafeteria was on the small side, it was neat and clean.

She was told that a retired former military man worked as the cook in the station kitchen. Unfortunately, Miyo wasn't able to meet him when she dropped by on Kaoruko's tour, but apparently, he was fastidious about his craft, and this pickiness was what kept both the cafeteria and the kitchen spick-and-span.

“The food at the canteen here is really good. The catered lunches they serve at the old capital station aren’t bad, but I mean, when you compare them to the freshly made meals here?” Kaoruko reminisced, a spellbound gleam in her eyes.

Miyo was startled to hear this.

W-wait, does that mean there’s a chance Kiyoka actually prefers the food here…?

The most delicious lunch she could make would still be cold when it came time to eat it. Surely Kiyoka would have preferred a piping hot meal to that if he could get one here.

She would need to ask him about that when she saw him next.

Lost in her thoughts, Miyo began to grow uneasy.

I feel like I’m being stared at.

It happened when she was walking with Kaoruko through the halls, or when they would poke their heads into each room. Wherever they went, the soldiers met her with rude, somewhat cagey stares.

She hadn’t felt these gazes yesterday. As Kaoruko put it, this was a boy’s club, so perhaps it was simply that the sight of two women walking about was unusual.

However, Miyo couldn’t help but get the impression their gazes were filled not with curiosity, but the same type of resentful sentiments she had been subjected to when she lived in the Saimori household.

“Last up is the dojo.”

Kaoruko’s tour was coming to an end.

In truth, Miyo had secretly worried that Kaoruko wouldn’t find her company very enjoyable since she didn’t have anything clever to say,

but she was a little relieved that Kaoruko had worn a cheerful smile on her face from start to finish.

"I looove the dojo, so I wanted to save the best for last."

"You're that fond of it?"

"Yeah. My family runs a dojo. I've spent a lot of time in them ever since I was little, so it's where I feel the most relaxed……and when I tell people that, they all give me this look that says, *that explains a lot*."

"Because you're so handsome?"

"*Hah-hah-hah.* Please, no one's ever nice enough to put it like that. Most of the time people tell me I'm really masculine."

Though a smile spread across Kaoruko's jocular face at Miyo's comment, there seemed to be a slight loneliness to it as well.

Miyo agreed that being called "masculine" despite being a woman must have brought up some complicated feelings, though she figured people must have said that to Kaoruko off-handedly.

She asked Kaoruko something that had been on her mind since the day before.

"Actually, now that you bring it up, I thought that only men could become soldiers. Are there any other female soldiers, besides yourself?"

Typically, only men could join the army. Miyo guessed that she wasn't alone in thinking this, as society generally understood the military to be an all-male institution.

Even in this very station, the washrooms and locker room were meant for men only. It didn't seem very suited to the needs of a female soldier whatsoever.

“Ahh, yeah good question.” Kaoruko nodded. “You’re right. Normally women can’t join the military, so you’re not under any misconception. The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, on the other hand, is a bit unique. There are actually other female soldiers besides me in the old capital.”

“There are?”

“Yup. I mean, there aren’t a lot of Gift-users to begin with, right? That’s why woman can join as long as they have the necessary combat skills. A female Gift-user is more powerful than a man who can’t use his supernatural powers very well, and that on its own means more military strength for the nation to freely utilize. Incidentally, while they aren’t treated as regular soldiers, even students can work in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.”

“Students, too……”

“I actually started working here as an assistant pretty early on, from when I was about fourteen or fifteen. Though, there’s not many student assistants or female soldiers. As you’re already aware, right now I’m the only women in this station, for example.”

“I see,” Miyo said, satisfied with the explanation.

After meeting Kiyoka and awakening to her own supernatural ability, Miyo had finally come to understand just how special the Gift-users’ positions were.

The Gift-users’ main duties were defeating Grotesqueries, but should a war ever break out, they would serve as powerful antipersonnel weapons. That was why the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit existed—to give the military the authority to order Gift-users as they saw fit.

Kaoruko……may not have mentioned this, but…

While female Gift-users were allowed to join the unit to bolster their fighting power, it was clear that the hope was they would get married and give birth to the next generation of Gift-users. Since this was taken as the default, there ultimately weren't many female soldiers after all.

Being recognized as a Gift-user came with many privileges. However, they weren't viewed as people.

Feeling like she had swallowed a bitter pill, Miyo followed Kaoruko and dropped by the dojo.

"Well, we're here."

The dojo was spacious and housed in a separate building from the station, which it connected to via a corridor.

Miyo estimated there were roughly ten people inside. The soldiers, clothed in martials arts wear, were working up a sweat, exchanging blows with wood swords or sparing in hand-to-hand combat.

"So you don't use bamboo blades."

"That's because this isn't kendo, but sword-fighting techniques meant for actual combat."

"Ah, Jinnouchi, you're here." A deep voice called out to Kaoruko from the side as the two women conversed.

Though not especially tall, the owner of the voice was a man with a sturdy physique. You could tell he was well-trained with a single glance, and his features had an intellectual quality.

Miyo remembered seeing him in the meeting yesterday. If she wasn't mistaken, he was a squad leader by the name of Mukadeyama.

"Greetings, Squad Leader Mukadeyama, sir."

“I should be greeting you, Jinnouchi. It must be exhausting to be back in the capital after so long.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I’ve got plenty of motivation, so I’m not tired at all.”

Mukadeyama laughed with a grunt before he casually looked over to Miyo.

“Well, now, if it isn’t the commander’s fiancée. Forgive me for not greeting you sooner.”

“…Good day.”

Mukadeyama lightly bowed with her reply. It felt almost like he was trying to see through to something inside Miyo.

“Hello, I’m Mukadeyama, one of the squad leaders. May I ask what sort of business has brought you here?”

He narrowed his eyes, and her sense of intimidation intensified.

This feeling she had, which Mukadeyama was testing, was probably overthinking on Miyo’s part. But the more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that he was trying to evaluate her. Both as Kiyoka’s fiancée, and as an Usuba.

He had no reason not to.

“Yes. I was in the middle of having Kaoruko show me around the station.

Miyo calmed herself and clearly answered Mukadeyama, who replied with a simple, “I see.” Then he picked up one of the wood swords leaning up against the wall and held it out to Kaoruko.

“Jinnouchi, how about a match for old time’s sake?”

“Sure… But I’m on bodyguard duty right now.”

“So you planned on coming all this way without doing anything? Skimp on your training, and you’ll get rusty. I’ll watch over Miss Fiancée here, so go spar.”

“Hmmm, I understand, sir, but…”

Kaoruko deliberated over the offer for a moment, but in the end, she hesitantly took the wooden sword from him.

“Well, if you insist, I’ll spar for a match.”

She doffed her coat, tossing it against the wall and rolling up her sleeves.

Mukadeyama selected a young man who had only been in the unit for two years to be her opponent.

“Thank you for the match.”

“…Thank you as well.”

The two bowed to each other, and the bout immediately got underway.

Even with her untrained eyes, Miyo could tell that the young man was strangely concerned with Kaoruko, aggressively striking at her right from the start. Kaoruko, on the other hand, coolly parried his attacks one after the other.

Incredible.

Kaoruko was very skilled. She seemed totally in control of the situation.

Before long, the other soldiers in the dojo were absorbed in the match.

“Keep it up!”

“Lose to a woman and you’ll never live it down!”

Shouts popped up here and there from the crowd of soldiers.

“Miss Fiancée, who do you think will win?”

Miyo was a little bit surprised when Mukadeyama abruptly threw a question at her. She’d never expected that he would try striking up a conversation.

Faced with his question, she found it hard to pick an answer.

The way she saw it, Kaoruko seemed like she had more vigor to spare, but nevertheless, there was a simple gap in stamina and arm strength between men and women. Kaoruko was still on the defensive, and she wasn’t attempting any counterattacks of her own.

After a moment of hesitation—

“…Kaoruko, I think.”

—she replied with her honest feelings, prompting Mukadeyama to quietly nod.

“Yeah, most likely. Jinnouchi far outclasses her opponent on a technical level… If she wasn’t a woman, she could’ve risen right up the ranks.”

If she wasn’t a woman.

This casual comment lodged itself in Miyo’s brain.

In other words, Kaoruko’s degree of skill ultimately didn’t count for anything. Even with her worldly ignorance, Miyo knew this was what Mukadeyama was implying.

“This is relevant for you, too.”

“Huh?”

She looked up to her side, locking eyes with him.

Yet she didn’t see a hint of emotion in his gaze. Though he was technically looking at Miyo, it appeared as if he wasn’t actually interested in her whatsoever.

More importantly than that, though—what did he mean by this being relevant for her, too?

Mukadeyama continued to address her in a languid tone.

“What I’m saying is, there are quite a few soldiers who believe it’s a nuisance to have you wandering around the station.”

“A nuisance…”

“There’s no reason to welcome you in our walls. You’re the commander’s fiancée, so there’s no one stupid enough to do something about it openly, but that’s how things are. As far as the men are concerned, a civilian woman who can’t even put up a fight is nothing but a nuisance around here, and I can empathize with the sentiment. All of us earned our positions in the unit, and we do our work with pride.”

Miyo dropped her eyes to her feet.

“On top of it all, you’re a blood relative of the Usubas. A Gift-user who’s also the enemy of Gift-users everywhere, so to speak.”

“……!”

“There isn’t a single Gift-user would feel comfortable about having someone like that hanging around.”

“An enemy……”

Miyo paled at the weight of the word.

It was her first time hearing the Usubas described this way, but she couldn’t completely deny the veracity of the label.

The Usubas used their supernatural powers to subdue other Gift-users when the need arose. This was true of Miyo’s own power of Dream Sight, too. Miyo herself was still inexperienced as a Gift-user, so she didn’t have easy access to it, but in theory, she had free rein over the life and death of anyone who was sleeping.

Scary, aggravating, annoying.

It dawned on her that it wasn't strange to be met with hostile looks filled with such negative emotions.

Miyo was sure this situation was a consequence of the Usubas being brought out from the shadows into the open.

"I'm not really trying to make blind assumptions here. But please remember that there are people here who don't take kindly to you. And don't go around doing anything uncalled for."

"…I understand."

Miyo lowered her eyes at Mukadeyama's firm warning.

He was right.

She'd finally learned the truth about the stares she'd gotten during her tour inside the station.

It's because I'm an Usuba.

While their approach may have been forceful, the Usubas had welcomed Miyo as a member of their family, and for that she owed them a debt of gratitude. She had never once found them terrifying or unpleasant, and that was the extent of it; nothing more, nothing less.

However, that was only because Miyo didn't consider herself a Gift-user and was wholly ignorant of what it was like to be one.

Furthermore, her current desire to work and be useful somehow undoubtedly counted as "sticking her head where it didn't belong" that Mukadeyama had mentioned. Whether Kiyoka gave her permission or not, that had no influence on the other soldiers' feelings on the matter.

Am I being selfish?

Right as Miyo let out a small sigh, the soldiers watching the sparring match erupted into an uproar.

Kaoruko had seized on a momentary opening in her opponent's strikes to knock his sword out of his hands and claimed victory.

"Thank you for the match."

"…Yeah, thanks."

The young soldier glared maliciously at Kaoruko. But instead of noticing this, she turned her back to him and stomped out of the dojo, her face bright red.

The spectators spat foul curses at her.

In all honesty, Miyo didn't find this a great environment.

"Good job, Kaoruko."

"Thanks."

Miyo handed her a handkerchief and consoled her as she returned, and the other woman smiled brightly at her.

The only saving grace was that it seemed like Kaoruko wasn't letting the other soldiers' remarks get to her.

"Whew, sparring matches really are fun. A good workout, too… Thank you very much for the invitation, Squad Leader Mukadeyama."

"Glad to see you haven't gotten rusty."

"If anything, my skills are sharper than they were the last time I was here, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmm, I don't know about that."

The two chuckled amongst themselves. There didn't seem to be any bad blood between them.

Mukadeyama's assertion that he wasn't trying to make blind assumptions must have been genuine. At the very least, Miyo could

tell that he was taking care not to be prejudiced about other people. That was why he'd recognized Kaoruko for her skills.

With me though…

Unlike Kaoruko, Miyo didn't have any combat skills to speak of. She couldn't use her Gift well, either.

Just as Mukadeyama said, Miyo was not only useless, but also being targeted by Usui; she was nothing more than a burden for the soldiers to shoulder. Taking that thought one step further, she was a nuisance, someone who would only give them more headaches to deal with.

Yet Miyo's only option here was to do what was within her powers as Kiyoka's fiancée. As much as she wanted to push herself, ultimately, she could only apply herself to the limited range of things she was capable of.

But that didn't prevent the situation from being irritating. Confronted with the fact that she alone was out of place here, Miyo felt unbelievably jealous of the faith Kiyoka had in Kaoruko.

◇◇◇

Once the sun set, Miyo and Kiyoka returned home together to find Yurie waiting for them.

"Welcome home, Young Master, Miss Miyo."

Yurie greeted them in the entryway with a smile, bringing Miyo an immense sense of relief. She relaxed the tension she had been holding in her body. It felt like she could finally breathe again.

"We're back."

"We're home, Yurie."

It had grown frigid outside since sunset, but the inside of the house was warm.

“Now go and get yourself changed, Young Master. Miss Miyo, please relax in the living room.”

“Oh, um, no, I’ll lend a hand!”

Miyo quickly stood up and hurried after Yurie as she returned to the housework.

She entered the kitchen and found that most of the preparations for the evening’s meal were already finished.

“Aren’t you tired, Miss Miyo?” Yurie asked, concerned, while she retrieved the dinnerware from the shelf.

“No,” Miyo briefly replied before her gaze fell to her feet. She must have looked exhausted for Yurie to have asked her that.

But she hadn’t done much of anything that day to tire her out.

“No, I’m feeling fine.”

If anything, this had been an easy day for her, since she usually used up her stamina on doing housework. Nevertheless, mental fatigue had instantly surged up inside her as soon as she arrived home.

Ever since meeting Karuko, Miyo had felt like there was something constantly weighing on her heart. Once Mukadeyama’s words made her understand the reality of the current situation, she had steadily sunk deeper and deeper into melancholy.

Miyo unconsciously sighed, prompting Yurie to put her hand over her mouth.

“Oh my… Please sit down for a moment, Miss Miyo.”

Yurie pointed to the small chair in the corner of the kitchen.

Miyo was confused by the sudden request.

“What? But…”

“It will still be some time before the young master finishes changing.”

Yurie’s smiling face left no room for debate. Though the old woman was typically gentle and kind, Miyo had already experienced how frightening things could get when she grew angry.

Her only choice was to obediently follow her wishes.

“Wait there for a moment.”

Yurie made sure Miyo sat in the chair as she’d asked, then poured something into a pot and put it over a flame.

Miyo stared into space for a while before she was passed a steaming bowl.

“Here you go, Miss Miyo.”

“Thank you.”

Without thinking anything of it, Miyo took the bowl, and her eyes widened when she gazed at its contents.

It was filled to the brim with a thick white substance that gave off a sweet aroma.

A bowl of amazake…

She cupped the bowl with both of her hands, and warmth spread through her body from her fingertips.

“It’s already gotten quite cold lately, so I just bought some earlier today.”

“I’m sorry. I was supposed to help you.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Now please, drink it up before it gets cold.

Relieved by Yurie’s smiling face, Miyo brought the bowl up to her lips.

The sweetness of piping hot *amazake* sank right through to her bones, and the unique texture of the fermented rice grains that lingered on her tongue was delicious. How many years had it been since she had tasted this sweetness?

"It's delicious."

Miyo exhaled a hot breath of air.

It was as though the strong, sweet flavor had started to dissolve the leaden weight in her chest. Coupled with the warmth of Yurie's thoughtful gesture, Miyo felt like she would break into tears on the spot.

"Hee-hee. Looks like it was the right choice to buy some today."

Miyo returned Yurie's grin and slowly downed the rest of the *amazake*.

By the time the bowl was emptied, Miyo's heart was lighter than before.

"Yurie."

Just then, Miyo turned to face the voice coming in from the doorway and saw Kiyoka, changed out of his uniform and peering into kitchen.

"Oh, Young Master. Is something the matter?"

"…It's already dark out. If you're heading home tonight, I'll come with you part of the way."

"Oh my, where did the time go?"

Hearing this reminded Miyo that it had indeed been dark when they arrived home.

She stood up and placed the emptied bowl in the sink.

"I can finish the rest on my own, Yurie."

“Ah, yes, then I’ll leave it to you.”

“You’re coming with us, Miyo.”

“What?”

She cocked her head, leading Kiyoka to narrow his eyes slightly in exasperation.

“You haven’t forgotten that you’re being targeted right now, have you?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten… But, um, it will just be for a short while, won’t it?”

Yurie’s house wasn’t very far, and because it got dark so early in the wintertime, her family would come pick her up on the route home. It usually only took Kiyoka a few minutes to drop her off.

Miyo wasn’t underestimating Usui, but she couldn’t imagine that he would sneak into their house like a burglar in that short span of time.

Yet Kiyoka’s face only grew sterner with each word Miyo spoke.

“No. Do as I say.”

His tone was harsh.

Kiyoka was worried about Miyo and trying to protect her from harm, so the best thing to do here was obey him. That was obvious, given that she didn’t have the skills to defend herself.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t help comparing his reaction to the trust she’d witnessed between him and Kaoruko that other day. An indescribable feeling came over her.

“…I understand.”

Why was she so focused on Kaoruko and Kiyoka’s relationship?

Perplexed by her own emotions, Miyo quietly nodded.

After safely delivering Yukie to her family, Miyo and Kiyoka walked back home together along the night road, their path illuminated by only the moon and the stars.

They'd managed to talk plenty on the way there since Yuri had been with them, but the conversation immediately died once they were alone together. An awkward silence hung between them.

This is my fault, isn't it?

Miyo reflected on herself, looking down at her feet to make sure she didn't trip.

Since returning from the villa, she hadn't been able to interact with Kiyoka like she used to. Whether this stemmed from a sense of shame or her preoccupation with Kaoruko, she couldn't tell.

The silence continued before Miyo suddenly remembered something and called out to her fiancé, walking a few paces in front of her.

"Um, Kiyoka."

"What?"

"…Should I stop making you lunch?"

It was just an offhand question.

After hearing Kaoruko say the cafeteria food at the station was delicious, she thought to ask if he would prefer to eat that for lunch instead of the meal she typically prepared for him.

"Huh……?" Kiyoka, however, couldn't hold back his surprise, stopping to turn around and face her. "Why?"

The expression he wore was dyed with shock, turmoil, and grief unlike anything Miyo had seen up until now.

Miyo had anticipated, at most, the same terse reply he usually gave her, and so she was perplexed by his unexpectedly intense reaction.

“Um, well… Kaoruko told me about the station cafeteria and…”

Kiyoka stared at her as she gave her reply, and a cold sweat formed on her forehead.

“And?”

“She mentioned that the station cafeteria food was top-notch, so I thought maybe you’d also—”

“Ridiculous.”

Kiyoka tersely cut her off.

What exactly had upset him so much? Baffled, Miyo could only dart her eyes around in confusion.

“I-it’s, ridiculous……?”

“Absolutely. Miyo, I eat your lunches because I enjoy them. Much more than any cafeteria food. If making it is too much work…or you don’t want to make it anymore, then I’m fine with you giving it up, but I’d ask you to keep making it for me, if you’re up for it.”

The almost earnest timbre of his entreaty sunk into Miyo’s chest.

He had simply asked her to make his lunch, yet she was so overjoyed her lips rose into a smile.

Kiyoka actually enjoys my lunches.

Miyo had started off making meals for him of her own accord and would’ve immediately stopped if he told her he didn’t want them.

Nevertheless, she knew it would hurt to hear him say he actually didn’t want them. It made her ecstatic to hear Kiyoka needed her.

She responded, heedless of the lively vigor in her voice.

“I will! I’d love to continue making your lunch for you!”

“Great.”

Kiyoka widened his lips into a smile.

“Miyo, give me your hand.”

“Hm? Here.”

When she did as instructed, he extended his large palm to take hold of her small one. Then he pulled her close, her hand in his.

“It’s dark out. This is a lot safer, isn’t it?”

“Y-yes, I suppose so…”

She was holding hands with him.

The second Miyo comprehended the situation, her body flushed with heat, and her previously cold hand quickly warmed.

“……Please, don’t hate me.”

With all of her attention focused solely on their two hands joined together, Miyo didn’t catch the small murmur Kiyoka gave in reply as he led the way.

The two walked along the night road, enveloped in an entirely different silence from before.

⚜ *CHAPTER 3* ⚜

How to Spend Time with a Friend

The word *chores* comprised a variety of different tasks. That being said, the chores Miyo could handle were limited.

"This really is all I can do, isn't it?" Miyo murmured to no one in particular as she tied up the sleeves of her kimono with a cord.

Kiyoka had given her two options: Cleaning up various areas, including that disaster of a kitchenette, or organizing documents in the records room. She'd wavered slightly before finally settling on cleaning.

The records room housed reports and similar documents on incidents involving Grotesqueries. New ones arrived daily, and if they weren't taken care of, they would eventually turn into a huge mess.

Kiyoka had suggested that she'd learn more about the Grotesqueries if she organized the records room, but even with Kaoruko's help, Miyo wasn't confident a layperson like her would be able to do a good job.

I'd feel so awkward doing it…

She knew that if she looked at the reports and other documents, she'd get a peek into Kiyoka's work activities. Yet she hesitated to step into that part of his life.

She stole a glance at Kaoruko, who was taking off her outer coat and rolling up her sleeves.

I know I shouldn't be letting it get to me, but……

It was an endless cycle—she'd accidentally bring her thoughts back to Kaoruko, then heave a sigh.

Ever since she'd learned Kaoruko had been a potential marriage partner of Kiyoka's, her desire to learn about the past had gotten stronger and stronger.

Her fiancé's past. Kiyoka and Kaoruko's time together. What sort of relationship they'd had, and what sort of feelings existed between them. Whether or not they had maybe, just maybe, been in love with each other.

If they were in love, what good would that knowledge do me?

Even if they had feelings for each other, what in the world was she looking to do about it?

Criticizing someone wasn't the answer. Whatever sort of interpersonal relationships they'd had in the past, it didn't directly involve Miyo whatsoever. This was ground she should tread lightly; accusing them of anything would be preposterous.

She didn't want to know. Yet, she did.

"Oh dear, what should I do—"

"What is it?"

Miyo jumped when someone responded to her murmuring.

"K-Kaoruko! Please, you startled me…!"

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to scare you or anything. You looked really serious, so I just wanted to ask what was up."

Miyo calmed her heart, which was pounding from the shock, and turned to face Kaoruko.

Had she really been wearing so grave an expression? Actually, there was no question that she had serious thoughts weighing down on her, so Kaoruko's observations must have been right on the mark.

Miyo needed to be careful, or else she would get Kiyoka worried over nothing.

For the time being, she would put all she had into the cleaning she'd agreed to handle. Between her old home, Kiyoka's house, the Kudou villa, and now the station, she felt like she cleaned wherever she went, but that was simply a reflection of how well-suited she was for the task.

Though, you could also say that there simply isn't anything else I can *do.*

She clenched her fist to try and think past the wave of pity and depression crashing down on her, urging Kaoruko forward.

"It's nothing. Shall we get to it, then?"

"Sounds good."

Kaoruko nodded once without pressing the issue before opening the door to the kitchenette.

The inside was just as much of a disaster as she remembered. Miyo had handled chores in a variety of different places, but she'd never seen a room in such a ruinous state before.

"I-it's hard to know where to start, huh?"

Enigmatic stacks of wooden boxes with aged snack wrappers inside. Moldy bottles, buckets, bowls, and cups lying all over the floor, plus unidentifiable spills that had solidified. Dirty dishcloths and newspapers scattered everywhere, and an indescribable stench choking the air.

The place was a textbook visual of ruin and decay. The best thing to do first would be taking everything out of the kitchenette, but Miyo was honestly frightened of digging up something even more horrible in the process.

"Seriously, guys, you gotta be kidding…"

Kaoruko placed her palm on her forehead and gazed up at the ceiling.

The worst part of it was that this was far from the only room that needed deep cleaning.

Miyo understood how little attention the soldiers here normally paid to matters outside their line of duty. The thing was, Gift-users all came from notable families with storied histories, so when she considered that the men here were from these households, she realized that this wouldn't have turned out any other way. Complaining to them would be fruitless.

Nothing will get done if we stand here reeling in shock.

At any rate, they had to start somewhere, or things would never improve.

Miyo covered up her nose and mouth with a face towel, then valiantly strode into the kitchenette.

First, they needed to sort out everything in the room. Dinnerware, linens, and any other washable items needed a good scrubbing. They would have to collect all the long-expired foodstuffs and bury them. They could reuse any paper products that hadn't fallen prey to the mysterious liquid, but otherwise, they were a lost cause, soaked with an awful smell.

Just looking at the room was a slog. Once they set their minds to it and got started, however, Miyo and Kaoruko both silently worked their way through the cleaning.

"There's a clean bucket over here, so I'm going to put all the linens in it, okay?"

"Thank you… Oh, that box was open, so I put the dinnerware in there."

The two women quickly collected the smaller items together in any container they had on hand, confirming the minimum amount of

necessary information between each other as they went, before then removing them all from the room.

Whenever Miyo went out into the corridor, the soldiers passing by would glare at her.

Though none of the men went so far as to stop and gawk at them, they would slacken their pace when they got near the room to check out what Miyo and Kaoruko were doing inside.

During one of these moments, a group of soldiers rounded a corner to find Kaoruko, who had gone out to draw water.

“A woman really looks her best when she’s doing household chores.”

“Shouldn’t be butting in on the men’s work.”

“I’m just glad we’ve found ourselves a replacement janitor.”

The soldiers were all whispering conspicuously to each other, their voices loud enough so Kaoruko would hear. Their unbelievably rude comments made Miyo feel uncomfortable.

For some reason, however, the target of their snide remarks broke out into a smile.

“If my skills are proving useful, then it was worth it to come out here from the old capital. *Hah-hah-hah*.”

“Pfft, you can lose the bravado. It hurts to watch.”

“A woman’s no match for a man, no matter how much of a brave front she puts up.”

The soldiers laughed mockingly and deliberately bumped into Kaoruko’s shoulder as they departed.

How awful.

Miyo had been told the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was a meritocracy, but this problem had nothing to do with her abilities. The sparring match from the previous day had been the same way. The men all seemed intent on proving they were superior to Kaoruko since she was a woman.

Kaoruko's smile disappeared, and for a brief second, her face darkened before she grinned at Miyo as if nothing had happened.

"I've brought the water."

"U-um… Kaoruko, I—I um…"

The soldiers had gone too far. Despite Miyo's frustration, when she thought about how Kaoruko had gone out of her way to force a smile back on her face, she couldn't come up with anything to say.

"……Thank you, for the water."

"You're welcome."

Any words of encouragement would only hurt her feelings, so Miyo could only resign herself to accepting the bucket of water.

I'm fine with whatever they say to me, but…

Just as Mukadeyama had said, Miyo was both a complete outsider here and a relative of the Usubas. On top of that, she lacked the skills to silence people who would be critical of her, so she had prepared herself to face severe criticism. She was accustomed to being treated like a persona non grata since she had been the odd one out for as long as she could remember.

But Kaoruko was different.

Miyo could tell that she was proud and trying to carry out her duties to the fullest. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been accompanying Miyo so earnestly.

Her male peers were rejecting her diligent work ethic just because she was a woman. They wouldn't acknowledge her. It was the height of irrationality.

Once they had finished carrying most of the items out of the kitchenette, Miyo took a duster and began wiping away the dust that had built up on the higher places in the room. Kaoruko, meanwhile, washed dirtied items nearby.

"Miyo."

"Yes?"

Suddenly hearing her name, Miyo stopped what she was doing and turned to face Kaoruko.

"Are you having any trouble? Like with people saying nasty things to you, or with fitting in…?" Kaoruko inquired, her eyes fixed on her hands.

Miyo couldn't really figure out what she was trying to get out of asking this.

If anyone was having a difficult time here, it had to be her, right? She couldn't possibly feel anything from being insulted like that.

"……I'm fine."

Miyo was about to ask if Kaoruko was okay, but the words caught in her throat moments before they could leave her mouth. She couldn't do anything for the woman, even if she heard her out.

If she reported the soldier's behavior to Kiyoka, their commander, things might improve momentarily.

But she could easily imagine that handling things this way would breed further antipathy. The men would probably think that she was sucking up to authority because of her lack of any true skills or ability.

“As long as you’re okay. But sheesh, I am so sick of that sorta stuff.”

“I…don’t like it, either.”

Finished brushing away most of the dust, Miyo swapped her duster for a broom, and started cleaning up the trash in the room.

“Same here. It’s times like those make me wish I hadn’t been born a woman.”

“But you can still fight, Kaoruko.”

“I’m just stuck in the middle. I’m not feminine, but obviously I can’t be a man, either.”

Watching Kaoruko laugh this off and go back to work, Miyo realized something.

She was the same. Just like Miyo had been when she lived with the Saimoris.

No matter how painful, how cruel, things felt, she never dared show it. She pretended not to feel anything, fooling even herself to protect her heart.

Miyo had found it impossible to always wear a smile, but the way Kaoruko was living—stifling her feelings to get by—lined up with Miyo’s own experiences.

Her cheerful disposition wasn’t entirely a brave front. Nevertheless, there was no question that this environment was partly responsible for making her turn out like that.

It depressed her to think about the state Kaoruko’s heart must have been in.

“Aaaah, nope, enough of this. I can’t stand wallowing in misery. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Sounds good.”

She was right that they would end up feeling even worse if they continued their current topic of conversation.

"Oh, that reminds me, have you even been to the old capital, Miyo?"

"No. In fact, I hadn't left the imperial capital at all until recently…"

"Whaaat?!"

The two enthusiastically absorbed themselves in chit-chat, and before they knew it, they'd stopped paying attention to the stares of the male soldiers.

That night, Miyo was taking a breather in the living room after washing the dishes when Kiyoka returned from his bath.

"Kiyoka, have some tea."

"Thanks."

Miyo poured a cup of tea and placed it before Kiyoka as he sat down on the tatami floor, still wiping down his long hair with a towel. She'd also set a small bowl filled with mandarins on the tea table.

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm fine… More importantly, *you* must be exhausted from working yourself ragged all day."

"No, I'm okay."

Though Miyo did feel some fatigue, of course, it wasn't enough to grumble about to Kiyoka.

It had taken the whole day, but she and Kaoruko were able to largely clean up the kitchenette. Although they still had to sort through all the items they had temporarily removed from the room, the inside was spick-and-span. Once they put everything back in order, their job would be done.

When they finished up and Miyo looked over the kitchenette, so pristine she couldn't believe it was the same room, she and Kaoruko had grabbed each other's hands and rejoiced.

Miyo thought it had been a wonderful and worthwhile task, but it seemed that Kiyoka still wasn't convinced.

"So you say, but the weather's already gotten pretty cold. Push yourself too hard, and you'll get sick."

"I understand. I won't let myself get to that point."

"…We haven't really had a moment to catch our breath since coming back from the villa."

Kiyoka's quiet murmur prompted Miyo to think back over everything that had happened after meeting Kiyoka's parents.

The days she'd spent at the villa now felt like a lifetime ago.

They'd traveled there in late autumn, so it hadn't even been a month since their trip. But winter weather had started earlier this year, so by the time Miyo had gotten back to the house, the seasons had completely changed. There wasn't much time left until the new year.

"How's Godou doing?"

Kiyoka shook his head at Miyo's question.

"They say it'll still take a bit longer until he can have visitors. They're trying every possible treatment they have, though."

Godou had suffered terrible burns in the explosion at the Gifted Communion's base.

Gift-users were much hardier than the average person, so there was no risk of him dying, but his wounds were still in a terrible state—not something he could show to a woman. He was holding off from letting Miyo visit out of consideration for her.

“Are you also going to visit him once we get permission?”

“I am. I want to see him.”

Godou had helped her out in a variety of ways up until that point, and he was one of the few acquaintances Miyo had. She had no reason to turn down the invitation.

For some reason, a dubious look came over Kiyoka’s face when Miyo replied with excitement.

“You seem awfully enthusiastic about getting to see him.”

“What? Erm, I, um, I don’t mean anything strange by it… Godou’s helped me out a lot, and I’ve been worried about him this whole time.”

Somehow, her reply came across as a defensive excuse. Kiyoka glared with suspicion at her.

“You’ve been a bit standoffish lately, haven’t you?”

“What?!”

“Maybe it’s just my imagination, but it feels like you’re more distant than usual.”

“……”

Miyo was at a loss for words, and she slowly averted her eyes down to the side.

She wasn’t trying to be cold and standoffish around Kiyoka, of course. Yet, although she was trying to behave just like always, she couldn’t object to his comment, either.

Of course I am—I don’t know how I’m supposed to face him.

She’d been averting her eyes more frequently lately, and her words often caught in her throat. This must have given Kiyoka the feeling like something was off.

Her behavior didn't jump out to him when he was busy working or at the station because of the Usui situation, but there was nothing to prevent him from noticing when they were alone together.

"So when spring comes… Will you be my wife?"

"Miyo. Please don't forget about yesterday… That was how I feel."

"You look great. Very cute."

The events of the villa swirled around in her head. Just remembering them made her face go crimson.

While she had no reservations about marrying Kiyoka, what exactly did that kiss mean? And what did Kiyoka mean by "that was how he feels"? Had he always been the type to call someone "cute"?

On top of these embarrassing questions hounding her, there was now Kaoruko's presence to torment her as well.

I wonder… Did Kiyoka do the same things…say the same things to Kaoruko, too?

She would be devastated and inconsolable if he had. Just imagining this made her confused.

In the end, what did she really want to do?

Kiyoka had the freedom to feel however he wanted, too. While he treasured Miyo, she hadn't always been his lover, either. It was perfectly reasonable that women for whom he had feelings for, whether in the past, present, or future, would suddenly cross paths with her.

But if one such women really did show up, Miyo was sure she wouldn't be able to handle it. Slowly, she looked up once again at her fiancé's face.

"What's wrong?"

"S-s-s-sorry…!"

She couldn’t do it. Her face was so hot her eyes were practically spinning.

His porcelain fair skin and his bluish eyes. His night-transparent light-brown hair flowing from his shoulders down his back. Kiyoka was just in his usual nightwear, so why was he stunning?

“I wasn’t looking for an apology, really…”

“I—I—I’m not trying to avoid you. I swear.”

“I didn’t really think you would actually do something like that on purpose anyway.”

“Mrrrm……”

Miyo was mortified. She wanted to crawl into a hole.

“Was it something I did?”

“……That’s not it.”

He had it wrong. It was only that Miyo was unable to understand and bear her own emotions.

If she was more worldly, if she had a large number of friends and was accustomed to interacting with other people, then maybe she would’ve been able to get through things without being at the mercy of her own emotions by now. She might have learned how to confront both her feelings and Kiyoka’s.

It seemed like it would take some more time before she’d be able to do something about this vague, unclear sensation inside her.

Kiyoka’s face suddenly clouded over.

“Something bad happened at the station, didn’t it?”

Miyo widened her eyes in shock.

She never would have imagined him picking up on this. Though, when she thought about it for a moment, it was obvious. He was the

unit commander, so it made sense he'd have a grasp on what happened in his workplace.

"One of the men happened to see you and Jinnouchi and reported to me about it."

"It's…"

"If one of the squad leaders or I tell them off, it'll make them resentful. But I need to do something, or—"

"It's okay."

Miyo impulsively interrupted Kiyoka.

"W-well, I know it's not okay, but neither of us wants you to address it that way, Kiyoka."

Miyo could only guess what Kaoruko's feelings on the subject were. Nevertheless, she was confident they were on the same page.

"If you warn your men about it, there's bound to be a few who will find you unreasonable for doing so. That would be even worse, wouldn't it?"

Miyo wanted to avoid undermining the trust between Kiyoka and his men.

Neither she nor Kaoruko could avoid being totally unoffended by whatever was said to them, that much was true. Bullying was hard to take, and it might eventually get them down.

However, there had yet to be any violence, and it'd be much sadder if she and Kaoruko ended up sowing distrust between Kiyoka and the men in his unit.

"We'll do what we can to handle the situation ourselves, so you should keep focused on your duties instead," Miyo insisted with a smile.

Kiyo began to slightly open his mouth, but the words he left unsaid disappeared into a sigh.

“Oh, would you like more tea?”

“Yes, please.”

After refilling the teapot with the still-warm water from the kettle and giving it a small shake, she poured green tea into Kiyoka’s teacup.

The image of Kaoruko handing him a cup of coffee, a vaguely cheerful look on her face, came to Miyo’s mind, and a dark cloud again descended over her heart.

This isn’t good. I can’t let myself get like this…

She wanted things to go well with Kaoruko, and she wanted their friendship to strengthen. If Miyo brought these insecurities into the mix, then it would ruin any chance of things going well between them.

The quiet clunk of the teacup hitting the surface of the tea table brought Miyo back to reality.

“I don’t need any extra push to crush the Gifted Communion, but… *sigh*.”

“Kiyoka?”

Miyo was confused to see desolation suddenly descend over Kiyoka’s face after he took a sip of tea.

“You’re fine with leaning on Jinnouchi for help, but you won’t rely on me? Is that how it is?”

“Umm. I’m not, erm, leaning on Kaoruko. I think it’s a bit different than that.”

It was less that she was relying on her, and more that they were both supporting each other……or more accurately, she *wanted* them

to support each other. It certainly wasn't because she found it hard to depend on Kiyoka and was turning to Kaoruko instead, or anything like that.

"Why do you say that, Kiyoka?"

"……Forget it."

Miyo didn't really understand, but she was sure he wanted her to get along with Kaoruko.

Is there something that I can do?

Other than giving her words of encouragement, was there anything else she could do to help cheer Kaoruko up?

Housework was about the only skill at Miyo's disposal. In which case…

That's right. As long as I have that…

She immediately began coming up with a plan that would benefit both her and Kaoruko.

◇◇◇

The following day, Miyo and Kaoruko finished cleaning the kitchenette without incident before they went on to tidy up one place after the other.

Over the course of several days, they cleaned the storehouse where the unit's equipment was kept, organizing the interior, polishing the corridor floors, and wiping down all the windows. They washed and dried the piled-up laundry, collected and disposed of the trash, and ousted dust from every corner of the station.

One day, after Miyo had fully settled into her daily life of coming to the station every day…

Kaoruko had gone to the storehouse to grab a sponge, dustcloth, and other cleaning supplies to clean the water well behind the station. Meanwhile, Miyo was tidying up the watering cans and buckets scattered around the vicinity of the well.

B-brr, it's cold.

The well was outside. With nothing to protect her against the wind, cold gusts blew directly on her face and the sections of her arms and legs where she'd rolled up her kimono.

She had started the cleaning project thinking it would be better to get out of the way before everything froze over, but it was now dawning on her that this would go smoother when it warmed up.

With that in mind, Miyo went to head inside. Just then, she heard a man's deep laugh.

"Still though, women sure are convenient to have around, don't you think?"

"You can say that again. Look how eager they are to grovel on the floor to clean for us."

"Girls look much better holding a broom than a sword."

Her attention piqued by the exceedingly unpleasant remarks, Miyo quietly peered around the corner of the building, and her eyes fell on three soldiers, freshly finished with their training by the looks of it, chatting away with wooden blades still in hand.

Over the past several days, no matter what she was doing, she would always encounter snide remarks like these. It appeared around half of the unit's members were displeased with her coming and going in the station, along with Kaoruko's presence there.

On closer inspection, she noticed that one of the three men was the younger recruit who had previously sparred with Kaoruko.

"Women should know their place and stay out of our business."

“You got a real good thrashing yourself. I mean, the whole conversation about whether women can fight or not is ridiculous. They’re gonna get married eventually anyway, and then it’s no more work for them.”

A loud guffaw echoed.

Miyo learned what it felt like for her temper to finally reach its breaking point.

Why are they saying such horrible things?

They didn’t accept Kaoruko, her strength and her hard work, simply because she was a woman. Completely tainted by their own prejudices right from the beginning, they disregarded reality and derided someone giving everything she had.

There could be nothing more unreasonable, more outrageous.

The Saimori family had treated Miyo the way they had because she possessed no supernatural ability. While it was a painful memory for her, a frustrating and miserable memory, part of it was unavoidable.

Kaoruko, though, was different.

She was strong, and that strength came from her own hard work.

“Obviously, a woman’s never going to measure up to a man anyway. They can swing their swords all they want, but it won’t make difference.”

It happened without Miyo really being aware of it herself. She slowly walked out in front of the three men.

“Ah……”

“Did you hear all of that?”

Once the men became aware of her presence, they all grimaced at the awkwardness of the situation.

“Um…”

Just telling the men off here wouldn’t make prejudice suddenly disappear from the world. But Kaoruko had done nothing wrong. Miyo wanted to make sure these three understood that.

She locked eyes with each of the men before she finally spoke.

“I don’t think you should say stuff like that.”

“Excuse me?”

“I heard that the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was a meritocracy. A place where anyone with enough skill could join, even women. Was I mistaken?”

The men kept their mouths shut at her softly spoken question, their inability to offer any rebuttal written on their faces.

Essentially, they had realized that their claims diverged from the unit’s policies. When it came down to it, they were upset about losing to Kaoruko, to a woman. That and nothing more.

“You won’t be able to recruit the competent fighters you need if you mock people like that. And if losing to a woman’s so upsetting, wouldn’t it be more logical to first try making more of an effort yourself instead of driving her away with gossip?”

“What would you know? You’ve got nothing to worry about since the commander protects you from everything,” one of them murmured bitterly.

“Kn-knock it off.” One of the three tried to warn him against it, but the man didn’t stop. He stabbed his wooden sword into the ground and shook with rage.

“I guess patronizingly pointing things out from safety is the one thing even a woman can handle, huh? Meanwhile, we’re constantly fighting with our lives on the line. I’m not going to stay here and

listen to complaints from someone who doesn't have any damn clue what our jobs are like."

"……"

"Women lack stamina and strength. So how are they supposed to be able to fight just like we do? They can't, obviously. Women have other things they're suited for, so they can go do those. All they do is drag us down, so how come they're paid to shoddily imitate a man's work? Like hell I'm standing for that."

There was a kernel of truth in his objection. Women were undoubtedly physically weaker than men on average.

However.

"…You're not the one who gets to decide that. Kaoruko was rightfully evaluated and made into a soldier. What sort of authority do you have to reject her like that?"

The rational part of her mind was shocked at the depth of her anger. She could have never imagined so many words pouring out of her like this.

"If you're going to insist on denying Kaoruko her proper due, then I would suggest doing so once you've actually sparred against her and won."

At this, the men all became incensed. Miyo closed her eyes, anticipating they would strike her with their thick, well-honed arms.

A few moments passed, yet the impact never came.

"Well, well, what's got you all so riled up?"

The mocking voice belonged to a woman.

Miyo timidly opened her eyes and saw that Kaoruko had gotten between her and the soldiers.

"Tch……"

“Lay one finger on Miyo, and it’ll be the end of you.”

The men knitted their brows and glowered at Kaoruko before going off.

“Sheesh, immediately resorting to violence like that, I swear.”

“Kaoruko.”

Perhaps she had caught their conversation?

“Ah, don’t worry. I just got here. I don’t have any clue what you all were talking about. I’ll keep quiet about this to the commander.”

The eyebrows on her smiling face drooped for a moment, and Miyo understood she was lying.

She took Kaoruko’s hand.

“Let’s save cleaning the well for later.”

“What?”

“Come with me.”

Pulling the perplexed Kaoruko along, Miyo went to the kitchenette they had cleaned just a few days prior.

“What is it, Miyo?”

“I’ve got something good today. Please, take a seat.”

Miyo lined up one of the small stools that were stacked up in the kitchenette, and once she made Kaoruko sit, she took out the bundle in question from the cupboard. Then she undid the square cloth wrapper to reveal a small lunchbox.

“Is that a boxed lunch?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have lunch inside.”

Miyo held out the box in front of Kaoruko and removed the lid. When she did, Kaoruko’s eyes grew wide.

“Oh, it’s *manju*…”

“Um, well, I thought that maybe having something sweet would help keep your spirits up through unpleasant times.”

It was then that a very important thought crossed Miyo’s mind.

“…You don’t dislike sweets, do you?”

Now that she thought about it, she had never asked Kaoruko about her taste in food. The sweet buns wouldn’t cheer her up at all if she preferred, say, alcohol instead.

She had gotten the impression from her interactions with Kaoruko that she liked sweets and never even questioned it.

G-great, now I’ve done it…

However, the other woman just burst into laughter seeing Miyo get flustered.

“*Ah-hah-hah*. It’s fine. I love sweets,” she said before picking up one of the pale brown *manju* and taking a bite.

“How are they……?” Miyo asked bashfully.

Kaoruko’s eyes sparkled with wonder.

“They’re delicious! Wait, did you make these yourself, Miyo?”

“I—I did, actually.”

Miyo could’ve simply bought some, but she wanted to make something from the heart.

She’d gone with *manju* because right around the time she decided to make something sweet for Kaoruko, she remembered that a magazine had just come out with a recipe detailing how to make them.

“Wasn’t it tough to make these by hand?”

“No, it wasn’t too difficult.”

It had taken her a little longer than expected to gather the ingredients, but actually making them hadn't been hard.

Kaoruko clearly hadn't been lying about her fondness for sweets. She devoured the *manju* in her hand right before Miyo's eyes, wearing a blissful smile on her face.

"That was tasty. Thank you, Miyo."

"Of course… Would you like another?"

"Well then," Kaoruko happily replied to her offer, reaching out to grab her second.

"Thank you."

Hearing a small murmur escape from Kaoruko's mouth as she stared at the *manju* in her hands, Miyo raised her head.

"…Sorry I made you worry over me."

"Not at all."

Miyo gently placed the freshly closed lunchbox to the side and shook her head. Kaoruko hadn't forced her to do anything. However…

"In the house I grew up in, each and every day was a struggle. Sometimes just breathing made me miserable."

She had lived with her father being uninterested in her, her stepmother hating her, and her stepsister deriding her.

Over and over she had asked herself the questions—why was she alive when there wasn't anywhere she belonged, when she felt so unwanted?

"But…in my darkest moments, there were people who raised my spirits, even though we couldn't exchange words."

Unlike her childhood friend Kouji Tatsuishi, who would often cheer her up, the Saimori family servants never openly took Miyo's side. Still, they would show their concern in subtle ways, giving away unused daily necessities, or splitting their food with her.

Those moments had made Miyo unbelievably happy. Simply just from knowing there was someone who was thinking of Miyo and acting on her behalf.

"Kaoruko. If you want to talk, and you're okay with telling me, I'll listen. Whether it's venting or anything else. I probably won't be able to help you beyond lending an ear, but… If you keep smiling like that, you'll end up forgetting what it means to truly smile."

"……Yeah."

There was a slight tremor to Kaoruko's reply.

"You're really kind, you know that, Miyo?"

"I don't think so."

"No, you're nice. I may have asked about us becoming friends, but most people could never be this caring to someone they had only known for a few days."

Kaoruko tearfully smiled and bit into her *manju*.

"Delicious… Eating something this tasty has cheered me up a whole lot."

Then she let an apology quietly escape her lips.

"Forgive me."

⚜ *CHAPTER 4* ⚜

Genuine Emotions Deep Inside

Time passed as everyone remained vigilant for an attack from Usui and the Gifted Communion. One night, when the cold weather had begun to seep into the bones—

"I took tomorrow morning off. Do you want to come with me to visit Godou?"

—Kiyoka abruptly put forth an offer to Miyo while they were eating dinner.

"You got permission to visit him?"

"Yeah. Finally."

Seeing Kiyoka nod, Miyo unconsciously broke into a smile.

The fact that he was authorized to have visitors meant that Godou's condition had stabilized for him to see other people; he was on the mend.

She was deeply relieved to hear that his treatment was progressing smoothly.

"That's wonderful. I'm so glad."

"Sure is."

"…Kiyoka? Is something wrong?"

His reply was awfully curt. And the movement of his chopsticks had slowed to a crawl, until they finally stopped.

Had she said something to hurt him? Or worse, was he under the weather?

"Sorry. I was reflecting on what an intolerant person I am."

“Huh? Intolerant?”

She tilted her head—she didn’t think there was anyone as magnanimous as Kiyoka.

Miyo hadn’t the slightest idea why their conversation had prompted him to make that comment in the first place.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m at fault here. I didn’t seriously think that your concern was coming from a weird place, but… How do I put it? My feelings got a bit ahead of myself.”

Kiyoka began offering some sort of excuse, unnaturally mixing in coughs as he went. Completely unable to understand the point of her fiancé’s extremely unusual behavior, Miyo only grew more and more confused.

“Um, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, it’s fine. Nothing to worry about.”

“…Maybe I shouldn’t be out and about after all……?”

Miyo wanted to go visit Godou in the hospital, but if that seemed like it would cause problems, she didn’t want to selfishly insist on it.

“Don’t go around doing anything uncalled for.”

Mukadeyama’s words surfaced in the back of her mind.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Kiyoka. With him at her side, even Usui himself wouldn’t have an easy time getting his hands on her, which was why she traveled with him to the station every day.

However, if anything happened while they were out walking around town, it would already be too late.

At this point, the things I do won’t just affect me alone.

She tightly clenched her fist in her lap. Then a large open palm enveloped it.

“Kiyoka…”

He’d moved around Miyo at some point and was now staring at her with a serene expression.

His bluish eyes were as perfectly clear and beautiful as ever, like gemstones. They were so arresting that they made Miyo instantly forget about everything else.

“Are you scared?”

“Yes.”

She nodded her head meekly, and her fiancé gently pulled her in by the shoulder.

“This is a good opportunity for me to clear things up. In all likelihood, Usui is not your real father.”

“What…?”

“It’s clear if you compare when Sumi Usuba was married into the Saimori family to the time you were born. If Sumi Usuba had a secret rendezvous with Usui after being married, that would be a different story, but…the previous head of the Saimoris seemed worried that she’d try to escape and took great pains to make sure she didn’t leave the estate. Additionally, the Usubas were still aware of Usui’s movements at that time, so the chances of a secret rendezvous happening sound exceedingly slim.

The way Kiyoka spoke, like he was reporting someone else’s words to her, clearly signaled that he had gotten information regarding the Usubas from Arata.

Clearly, he’d noticed Miyo’s anxieties over the question of her parentage, so he and Arata had investigated the matter for her.

“I know very well that you feel uneasy about what to do right now. That’s why I’ll do anything I can to clear away those anxieties for you. You can be more open about what you’re feeling, it’s okay.”

"……I understand."

"I'm thinking about what I can do for myself, too. Right now, I want to overcome this period of uncertainty together."

Kiyoka's frank words stuck hard in her chest.

He wouldn't leave Miyo to fend for herself, so she needed to stop thinking about everything under the assumption she could somehow manage alone.

"I…I've been worried about what I would do if something happened while I was walking outside. If I came across Usui out in town…"

Talking about what was on her mind openly like this made her chest feel a bit lighter. Kiyoka smiled faintly, shaking his head from side to side.

"You don't need to worry. Seeing as Usui is leading an organization of his own, he won't do anything to tarnish the Gifted Communion's reputation with the commonfolk in broad daylight. Especially if he's trying to coax you to his side. He'll have plenty of other things to target, and plenty of other methods at his disposal."

"Other things to target…?"

"Forget it. At any rate, you'll be safe tomorrow, so we're going to the hospital. Godou's been stuck in bed for days on end, and it sounds like he's bored out of his mind.

Miyo got the feeling Kiyoka had sidestepped an important point.

However, there were still too many things that remained unseen to her at the moment, and too many areas beyond her thoughts' reach. The nagging sensation settled briefly in the back of her mind before exiting her thoughts, and she nodded back at Kiyoka's smiling face.

Godou had been admitted to a military hospital. It was part of the military headquarters' facilities, equipped with cutting-edge

equipment and the empire's most skilled doctors of all different fields in permanent residency.

Given it was a military facility, it was not readily open to anyone except soldiers, but naturally that wasn't an issue for members of the armed forces. Their family members could also receive the treatment here, and they also had permission to visit patients.

Still, I never thought there would come a day when I'd visit the military headquarters.

That morning, as she was rocked back and forth in Kiyoka's automobile, Miyo thought back to the day they first went out together.

If she remembered correctly, they had traveled via automobile then, too.

That spring, shortly after she had met Kiyoka for the first time, she had mistakenly assumed they would be parking his car in the headquarters after being told they were going to his workplace.

So many things had happened since that spring day. Both she and the environment had undergone drastic changes.

Part of her felt like that was forever ago, while another part of her felt like it was just yesterday.

Back then…I was so unsure of myself and always scared.

Kiyoka was kind, a far cry from the type of person the rumors had made him out to be.

That was why she'd wanted to remain at his side for as long as she could, but she didn't have any Gift, and she wasn't an outstanding noblewoman either, like her half-sister. That's why she'd figured that Kiyoka would eventually rescind his marriage offer.

Just how much had she changed from back then?

Had she gotten greedier? Had she matured and grown?

She stole a glance at Kiyoka, his hands on the steering wheel next to her.

“What is it?”

She had only looked at him for a brief second, yet he had noticed her gaze and she averted her eyes.

“Nothing, I was simply recalling the first time you took me out.”

“Ahh, back then, huh…”

Looking back fondly on the memory, Kiyoka squinted his eyes in a smile.

Miyo faintly hoped that just as she looked back on the day as a wonderful yet embarrassing moment, Kiyoka would think of it equally as fondly.

The military headquarters—the Imperial Army base in the capital—was slightly removed from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

A number of large, imposing buildings lined up throughout the spacious plot of land, surrounded by a tall metal fence. The iron gate was shut fast, and through its lattice one could glimpse well-built soldiers coming and going.

Since Kiyoka was an officer, he naturally wasn’t subjected to any questioning, briefly greeting the gate guard before advancing the automobile inside the base’s walls.

“Are you nervous?”

Something about Kiyoka’s question amused her, and Miyo couldn’t hold back a laugh.

“*Tee-hee*, oh, Kiyoka.”

“What?”

His dejected reply only made her giggle even more.

“I mean, come now, Kiyoka. It wasn’t long ago when I went to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station that you asked the same thing. ‘Are you nervous?’ Just like that. *Tee-hee-hee*.”

“Don’t laugh… What else would I say?”

“I know. Thank you. You don’t need to worry about me.”

The way Miyo used to be, she would wither after, rudely assuming that Kiyoka himself was actually worried that she would make some big mistake because of her nerves and embarrass him.

But now she could chuckle like this, because Kiyoka and the people in his life cared about Miyo.

“This isn’t a laughing matter… I don’t really want to say this, but you need to be mentally prepared to be here.”

“I will.”

The military headquarters wasn’t the same as the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Station.

Most soldiers didn’t possess any supernatural abilities, and Gift-users within the military, in some respects, received special treatment. Miyo had heard that there were many who had complicated feelings regarding Gift-users because of that.

On top of this, anyone who was a bit more knowledgeable of this situation understood that Kiyoka’s fiancée had Usuba blood, making her a relative of the criminal at the center of it all, Naoshi Usui.

She had been shot plenty of rude looks at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, but apparently that wouldn’t compare to what she’d face here.

“I’m still fine, though.”

She was used to stares.

Miyo wasn't used to them because she *wanted* to be; she had endured her share of painful experiences because of them, but at this point, she had finally become able to accept that such glares had, in fact, served to make her who she was now.

She was able to recognize that this was her forte.

Miyo got out of the automobile and followed behind Kiyoka at his side while they made for the hospital. She did indeed sense many curious stares, ones that could only be described as inconsiderate, from the soldiers walking by, but they didn't bother her as much as she'd expected.

…After all, I get the feeling that Kiyoka stands out more than me here.

Between the two of them, the soldiers' interest fell on Kiyoka boldly walking forward, carrying the flowers and desserts he had bought as get-well gifts on the way, in his arms.

"That's the Kudou family's…"

"Is that him? I heard he's quite skilled."

"Even the top brass doesn't have authority over some of the staff, and—"

"…So that's what he looks like, huh."

The whispers she overheard were clearly about her fiancée.

Kiyoka almost never showed up around headquarters, it seemed, so his presence piqued the other soldiers' interest. With someone of Kiyoka's standing in front of her, Miyo's lineage was trivial by comparison.

It's almost a bit of a letdown.

A few soldiers went deathly pale and fled as soon as they laid eyes on him. Miyo wondered where exactly that reaction came from.

Miyo looked around, thinking about how she would get lost on her own because the buildings looked so similar. Eventually, the two arrived at the hospital.

Kiyoka had come to visit Godou once, right after he had been admitted, so there was only a brief exchange with the receptionist before they headed straight for Godou's room.

When Kiyoka and Miyo arrived in front of his hospital room, they found a male doctor in a white coat exiting.

"Oh, well if it isn't Kiyoka!"

He looked around thirty years old. The doctor, tall and lanky with an unkempt beard, addressed Kiyoka with an almost capricious grin.

"Been a while," Kiyoka replied, looking truly and deeply disgusted.

"Hmmm, looks like you haven't changed, have you? What an arrogant way to treat an old man! *Hee-hee*."

The doctor's peculiar laugh made Miyo's skin crawl.

Though, from the familiarity he showed toward Kiyoka, they appeared to be acquainted. Just what sort of relationship did they have? She was simultaneously curious and repulsed.

"…Enough with that creepy laugh of yours."

"*He-hee*. Come on, who cares about the way someone laughs? Life's a lot more peaceful if you don't sweat the small stuff, you know."

"*Haaah*… Well, how's Godou doing?"

Another *he-hee* slipped out of the doctor at Kiyoka's sigh.

“Good enough to have visitors. His wounds probably don’t stand out as much as they used to. Though, his stamina’s dropped remarkably, so I’d say it’ll be a prolonged stay.”

“Does it look like he’ll recover before the end of the year?”

“Hmmm, I’d say he’ll easily be able to make it back before then.”

“I see. Appreciate it.”

The doctor made to leave, and Miyo bowed slightly when their eyes met. He flashed her a truly repulsive smirk, causing her hasty smile to waver.

Unable to stand there any longer, Miyo asked Kiyoka about the doctor as he put his hand on the hospital room door.

“Yes, he’s a relative from my mother’s side. He has a healing Gift—we’re coming in.”

Although he announced their presence, Kiyoka opened the door without waiting for a reply, and Miyo followed behind him into the hospital room.

While the place wasn’t exactly spacious, it was still private, and none too cramped. Godou sat in the back of the room, propped up on a clean white bed.

“Oh, Commander!”

Ignoring Godou’s exaggerated waving at seeing them arrive, Kiyoka picked up from where he left off.

“…His healing Gift is truly outstanding, but his personality is a bit of a problem. He’s not necessarily evil, but…”

“I see.”

“Another drawback is, while his help will heal injuries very well, he charges an exorbitant amount for it as a ‘special service fee.’ However, there’s no question he’s got skills, enough to make the

fees worth it when push truly comes to shove and we're out of options."

Essentially, this meant that Godou's injuries right now were horrible enough to warrant the doctor's aid.

If Kiyoka ever faced injuries like that, would she be able to remain level-headed? Miyo couldn't imagine the possibility right now, but perhaps she needed to prepare herself for such a situation.

"Hey now! Didn't you come here to check on me? Don't just ignore me."

Following Godou's cry of resentment at being totally ignored, Miyo heard a chuckle.

"*Ah-hah-hah*. How delightful. Godou, you truly are so entertaining."

"Stuff it!"

Miyo hadn't noticed a figure concealed in the shadow of the partition screen.

The visitor before them was dressed in a gaudy kimono and toying with a fan in his hands, a young man with all the appearances of a playboy—the head of the Tatsuishi family, Kazushi Tatsuishi.

Kazushi appeared to be entertaining himself by teasing Godou, as usual.

"It's been nonstop shouting and yelling with you, Godou. How sad when I traveled all this way here to see you."

"Did anyone even ask you to come?"

"Come now, Godou, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Since when?!"

After having a good laugh at Godou's shouting, Kazushi snapped open his fan and stood up.

"Well then, I suppose I should be heading out."

"Please, go right ahead. Finally, what a relief."

"I'll swing by some other time."

"Don't!"

Kazushi donned his brightly colored *haori* overcoat and smiled as he looked over at Miyo and Kiyoka.

She hadn't seen him in a while, but she still couldn't believe he was the head of the Tatsuishi family. "Prodigal son of a noble family" was a much more fitting description.

"Mr. Kudou, good to see you."

"Likewise. Tatsuishi, did you ask Major General Ookaito for permission to come here?"

"That's right. I heard Godou had been seriously injured, so that got me curious. It sounded amusing, too."

"Try to rein in those tasteless jokes of yours."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Kazushi departed the hospital room with a casual wave.

Kiyoka watched him leave together with a look of exasperation on his face, then came up beside Godou's bed. For some reason, this prompted the other man to burst into laughter.

"*Pfft! Ah-hah-hah-hah!* You, Commander? Flowers? *Pffft*, this just looks wrong!"

"……"

Miyo glanced sideways to gauge Kiyoka's reaction; he was clearly cloaking anger beneath his surly expression.

She often wondered if Godou intentionally tried to push Kiyoka's buttons. If that was so, then he wasn't much better than Kazushi, who had come here specifically to tease Godou.

The thought would likely offend him, so she kept her mouth shut.

"You certainly seem to be doing well. I guess our visit wasn't necessary."

Looking down at Godou with ice cold eyes, Kiyoka passed the bouquet to Miyo, telling her to arrange them for him, before placing the desserts on top of a nearby shelf and turning away from both of them.

Miyo was taken aback at seeing her fiancé grow so quick to anger.

"Kiyoka?"

A-are we going to leave already?

As Miyo lamented the fact that they had still only just arrived, Kiyoka turned back to her for a moment.

"I'm going to step out for bit. Miyo, you can stay here and relax for now."

"Oh, okay……"

Why was he leaving after we had come all this way to see Godou?

Godou's teasing couldn't have actually angered him, she just knew it. If this was enough to make Kiyoka so mad he didn't want to be in the same room as the man, Godou's life would have ended a long time ago considering how many jokes he cracked.

Moreover, Miyo had the vague sense that something was off about Kiyoka as she watched him leave. She debated whether she should follow him or not.

Why…?

Though she was at a loss, she did as she was told for the time being, opening up the bouquet in her arms and arranging it in an empty glass vase.

It appeared that Kazushi hadn't brought any flowers of his own for his visit, so the glass vase had been still stored away unused.

"Sorry to make you do that, Miyo."

"Not at all."

Tasks like this were a cinch for her.

Miyo replied with a smile at Godou as he apologized with his hand on the back of his head.

Godou came off just as energetic and upbeat as always, but there were more white bandages and gauzes peeking out in places from his robes than she had expected, and they looked painful.

This was even after he had gotten permission to have visitors. Miyo shuddered at the thought of how horrible his original injuries must have been.

"Um, Godou. I wanted to, um, take this chance to, well. I don't know how I should say it, but… I am truly, truly sorry."

Finished arranging the flowers, Miyo turned back to Godou and bowed deeply.

His injuries were Naoshi Usui's fault. He was the Usubas' responsibility, and Miyo couldn't claim to be totally uninvolved herself.

Apologizing might have put Godou in an awkward spot, but she couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

"Please, there's nothing that you need to apologize for, Miyo."

"But—"

Godou slowly shook his head.

“I could say not to worry about it, but that’s probably impossible, huh? The people at fault here are the ones who did this, and who are planning to do even worse—Naoshi Usui and the Gifted Communion—not you.”

“……Okay.”

“So I should really be the one thanking you for coming to visit me.”

Godou’s smiling face was the same as always, friendly and cheerful.

Miyo was glad he was okay. If he had lost his life, there would have been a void in the lives of both her and Kiyoka.

She sat down on the small wooden chair at Godou’s bedside.

“Do your injuries hurt?”

“I mean…,” Godou evasively replied to Miyo’s question. “Up until two, three days ago, I was honestly in a looooot of pain. My whole body was wrapped up in bandages, and the burn wounds under them were awful.”

Godou’s tone was light, as though he wasn’t talking about anything serious, but his statement was heavy.

With severe burns inflicted all over his body, normally one would be drifting between life and death—and probably beyond saving. Fortunately, Godou not only possessed the sturdier body of a Gift-user, but he’d also gotten help from someone with a healing Gift, so his life had been saved.

She heard that there were other corps beyond the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit who had also been caught in explosions at other Gifted Communion hideouts, but by some miracle, there were no fatalities.

“Once I’m back in action, I’ll round up all those Gifted Communion guys, just you watch. I may not look it, but I hold on to my grudges for a looooong time!”

“P-please give it your all, then.”

“Sure will!”

After coming to a pause in their conversation, Miyo grew worried about Kiyoka, who still hadn’t returned.

Perhaps he was having a long talk with that strange doctor, a relative of his mother’s.

As Miyo speculated about her fiancé’s whereabouts, Godou murmured something.

“When I was first admitted to the hospital……even our fearless leader was at a loss for words. He definitely feels partly responsible for the attack.”

Miyo’s chest tightened at hearing that Godou’s injuries had truly been quite severe.

Kiyoka wasn’t verbose to begin with, but this was coming from the man who was always working at his side, so the sight of the wounds must have truly shocked him.

“I’ll probably get yelled at again for telling you things I shouldn’t, buuut…!”

“Huh?”

“The commander feels responsible as my superior officer, that’s obvious. But beyond that……I think it brought him back to the past.”

“To the past?”

Godou nodded without any hint of silliness, a rare look of seriousness on his face, before he cast his gaze outside the hospital window.

The sky, which had been clear when Miyo left that morning, had since been overtaken by overcast gray clouds. It looked like it would snow at any moment.

Kiyoka and Mr. Godou's past together……

Kiyoka's past—Miyo couldn't contain her curiosity, especially after meeting Kaoruko.

Miyo tensed up slightly, wondering what exactly she might hear from the mouth of Kiyoka's devoted subordinate.

"See, my dad was the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit before Kiyoka."

"Your father?"

"Yes. He was an esteemed Gift-user. Strong and adored by his men, too. Me, well… I rebelled against having a dad like that and studied abroad."

This was all news to Miyo. Though one part about Godou's statement stuck out more than anything.

He *was* an esteemed Gift-user.

Noticing his use of the past tense, Miyo realized there was a chance Godou's father had already passed on.

"My dad hounded Commander Kiyoka back in his student days to join the military. He wanted him to become the unit's next commander. But the commander wasn't interested in joining the military, so he went on to study at the imperial university. Even after this, my dad refused to give up and kept inviting him to join."

Miyo couldn't parse Godou's expression. He continued to gaze outside the window without once turning back to face her.

"One day, my dad was killed in the line of duty. He was up against a fierce opponent, though he could have easily beaten him if he'd had

Commander Kiyoka at his side. The emperor wound up ordering him to help my dad, but he didn't make it in time."

"That's horrible……"

Miyo clutched her chest, empathizing with the feelings Kiyoka felt at the time.

"Now, obviously it's not the commander's fault that my dad died. But when I returned from studying abroad, I was convinced he was responsible for my dad's death. Thanks to that, the commander felt incredibly guilty, and he ultimately ended up joining the unit."

Godou let out a brief sigh and turned to Miyo with a forlorn grin.

"The day my dad died, all of the soldiers got out unharmed. I'm guessing that since I was in danger of being the only fatality when the Gifted Communion attacked, the commander couldn't help recalling what happened back then."

"……"

Miyo got the sense that no matter what words she offered him, they wouldn't be the right ones.

She didn't regret hearing Godou's tale. Nevertheless.

"I'm so sorry. I—I shouldn't have heard all of this."

"Nah, I just started blabbing on by myself. You want to know more about the commander, right?"

"But how…?"

Miyo's eyes widened at Godou's all too accurate reading of her.

Kiyoka didn't often talk about himself with Miyo. But that was precisely why she then *wanted* to learn more about him, and she ultimately thought about how inconvenient such a desire would be to Kiyoka himself.

That was why she hadn't said a peep to anyone about it, and yet…

It wasn't good to divulge something that Kiyoka himself didn't want to talk about. Even Miyo had plenty of episodes in her past she wouldn't want to bring up voluntarily.

I'd rather not talk about painful memories, and I wouldn't want anyone to learn about them, either…

However, there was the moment when she'd realized that Kiyoka already knew most of what there was to know about Miyo's difficult past. She remembered just how utterly relieved she had felt.

"Besides, you know how awful the commander is with words. I figured he prooobably hasn't properly told you any of this. And it seems like I was right on the money. Sheesh, give me a break."

He capped off his statement with a laugh. Miyo couldn't see any traces of Godou's clouded expression from moments ago.

She unintentionally directed a nagging question at Godou.

"Is it okay for me to directly ask Kiyoka about his past?"

A past that one wanted to keep buried.

Obviously, he must have had moments like that, too. Even if Miyo implored him to tell her, even if she insisted that she wanted to know all about it, would he allow it? Would she end up hurting him?

These were judgments she should have made for herself, and nothing would come from asking Godou about any of it. Still, she wanted the opinion of someone credible for guidance.

Godou squinted with an unusually faint and serene smile.

"I'd wager the commander would be a lot happier to hear you ask him outright. I'm sure he'll want to confide in you about anything and everything if you're the one asking, Miyo. That's just my take, of course."

“You think so…?”

“At this point, you should be able to guess how the commander feels without having to ask me, right? Either trust in your choice and confront him, or back down—either’s good for me.”

He was absolutely right.

Miyo had spent a much shorter length of time with Kiyoka than Godou or Kaoruko had. Still, she felt like she had a unique insight into her fiancé. Where would she get if she didn’t trust it?

“Thank you very much. I’ll give it a shot.”

“If by any chance you get sick of that brusque and frigid commander of ours, you’re always welcome to come with meeee. I’d welcome you with open arms,” Godou joked, a huge grin on his face.

Miyo smiled and nodded.

“I will.”

“All right!”

“What’s ‘all right’ now?” Kiyoka asked as he came back into the room.

Godou stiffened at the question.

“Nothing, sir! Everything’s perfectly normal!”

Seeing his subordinate earnestly saluting him, Kiyoka fixed him with the briefest of cold stares before sighing.

“Miyo, it’s time we get going. Satisfied?”

“Yes.”

Miyo was worried about Godou’s wounds, but for the time being, she had confirmed for herself that he was doing well.

Her current situation didn't allow for much freedom, so she didn't know if she would be able to come visit him again, but this was enough to put her mind at ease. This was likely true for Kiyoka, too.

"Be sure to come by again soon, okaaaay?"

"How about you hurry up and get better so you can get back to work, fool."

"Noooo thanks! I still haven't had my fill of these lazy days of eating and sleeping yet!"

"……"

"Don't worry. With all this free time, I'll be sure to think about the absolutely perfect way to get my revenge on that Naoshi Usui!"

Godou waved, and Miyo returned it with a small one of her own before she departed the hospital room together with Kiyoka.

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Watching his commanding officer and their fiancée leave his room, Godou reclined his upper body back down into the bed.

While he was grateful that people had been coming one after another to see him immediately following the end of his visitor restrictions, it made him a bit tired.

"I've definitely lost some stamina…"

Healing Gifts mended people faster than normal treatment, and cleanly, without any lingering complications, but in exchange, they consumed a large amount of the patient's stamina.

As a result, the treatment wasn't perfect, and it required a hospital stay as well.

However, Godou was very aware of these side effects, and his true desire was to get back to work as fast as possible.

We're lacking personnel as is, so how can I lay in bed while everyone else is working hard?

Closing his eyes, feeling impatient and agonized at a situation outside of his control, some time passed before another visitor arrived to see him.

He hadn't heard about anyone from the main house or his family coming, so he turned his head, wondering who it could be.

Slowly opening up the hospital room door and stepping inside was a young woman wearing a military uniform he vaguely recognized.

"It's nice to see you again, Godou. How are your injuries?"

"……Kaoruko Jinnouchi? That you?"

"Bull's-eye!"

Watching her comically snap her fingers with her reply, Godou was convinced it was none other than his former comrade, who he hadn't seen in years, Kaoruko Jinnouchi.

While he knew that she had come from the old capital to fill in for him, he'd never expected her to come visit.

Though they hadn't been in touch for several years, they had been fairly close before she was stationed in the old capital, so he wasn't especially surprised to see her.

Godou propped up his upper body again and sighed.

"As you can see, my wounds have gotten a lot better. Aren't you supposed to be on duty right now, though?"

At his suspicious questioning, Kaoruko sat down in the wooden chair Miyo had used earlier and replied:

"No need to worry. I've been tasked with guarding Miyo, but today Mr. Kudou said he'd be with her all morning, so I took some time off."

“I see.”

Though her physical strength and stamina were inferior to a man’s, Kaoruko was skilled.

Since she and Miyo were both women, she could accompany her on a much wider range of activities, making her an ideal bodyguard.

“Miyo and Mr. Kudou were here just little while ago, right?” Kaoruko quietly murmured, looking at the flowers in their vase and the desserts still in their box.

“Yup. Though the commander was as terse as ever.”

“I see you two are still thick as thieves.”

Kaoruko smiled with amusement at Godou’s exaggerated shoulder shrug.

“You handling the work all right, Jinnouchi?”

“Reasonably well enough. I said I’m guarding Miyo, but the truth is my days are spent doing little chores around the station with her. It’s enough to keep me from getting bored.”

Suddenly, a memory related to Kaoruko surfaced in the back of Godou’s mind.

Right, now I remember, wasn’t Jinnouchi—

Her family ran a long-standing and prestigious dojo. Her father was the master there, and Godou recalled her mother had come from a Gift-user family.

While her mother herself was Giftless, due to what was called atavism, Kaoruko possessed a Gift of her own. In addition to her talents with a sword she had inherited from her father, she was seen as quite an outstanding warrior.

That was why there had been talk of her potentially becoming Kiyoka’s wife.

Ah, that probably explains it.

Godou guessed the current situation and ruffled his bangs with his hand.

Miyo had always been an anxious and timid girl, but today there had been more doubt in her eyes than usual. The reason behind her interest in Kiyoka's past was likely the woman sitting in front of him.

"Jinnouchi."

When Godou addressed her, Kaoruko turned her eyes from the flower vase to look at him.

"What is it?"

"So, tell me. Are you still in love with the commander?"

Kaoruko's eyes widened like saucers.

"…What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me, c'mon. You've had a thing for the commander for a long time now, right?"

"Not really…"

He felt a mixture of pity and annoyance as he watched her avert her eyes and cast them down slightly.

Godou didn't think he was outstandingly perceptive, but nevertheless, after working together, he had naturally picked up on Kaoruko's feelings.

Kiyoka saw Kaoruko as just another person he worked with, no more than any one of the many potential marriage partners he'd had over the years. But things were different for Kaoruko.

"I'm not trying to criticize you or anything. I think anyone's free to have feelings for whoever they want."

"……"

“Thing is, though…”

Godou trailed off.

He didn’t want to hurt Kaoruko on purpose, but if he said this, she was probably going to cry. However, there were some things even Godou couldn’t tolerate, so he was left with no other choice.

“You gotta stop trying to meddle with their relationship, okay?”

Kaoruko gasped and looked up.

Judging by her reaction, it was clear that she had already done something uncalled for.

“I—”

“Don’t try to act innocent now. I think everyone can choose who they love, but I don’t like underhanded behavior.”

It had taken years for Kiyoka to find peace of mind in Miyo.

Godou understood because he had been by Kiyoka’s side, watching him for as long as he had. Fate had brought those two together. Each of them soothed the other, and that was how it should be—without someone else getting between them.

Godou felt bad that Kaoruko’s feelings had never amounted to anything, but he wouldn’t stand for her messing with their emotions.

“……What do you know, Godou?”

He wasn’t deterred by Kaoruko’s strained, labored voice.

“If you plan on getting in between them and disrupting things, that’s wrong. At the very least, I know for certain that sort of behavior isn’t going to benefit anyone, including you.”

“Excuse me!”

Godou heaved a heavy sigh, without trying to stop Kaoruko from flying out of his hospital room.

The rest was her own problem to face. Nevertheless, he felt a slight twinge of regret. Maybe he had said too much.

Since when did I become such a busybody, hmmm…?

Whether Kaoruko resented him or not, he preferred that much more than any unnecessary discord popping up in Kiyoka and Miyo's relationship.

Godou laid his now very exhausted body down in his bed and drifted into a light sleep.

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Right after they exited the hospital, Kiyoka suddenly turned back to Miyo.

"Want to walk outside for a bit?"

"……Sure."

They both fell silent and continued past the gate they had originally entered as they left the grounds.

There was still a bit of time before they had to head back to the station. Miyo had no reason to refuse an offer from Kiyoka, who still seemed a bit different than usual.

Passing through a narrow path from the street in front of the gate, absent of many normal passersby, they stepped out into the main street.

"Sorry. Are you cold?"

Miyo shook her head at Kiyoka's worried expression.

She was wearing her *haori* overcoat with a scarf around her neck, fully protected from the cold. Of course, that didn't make the seasonable outside air blowing into her face any warmer, but it wasn't chilly enough to make her tremble and shiver.

“I’m fine.”

“That’s good.”

Without another word, Kiyoka once again faced forward and continued walking. However, it was very much like her fiancé to slow his gait down enough for Miyo to keep up behind him.

Like Kiyoka.

She felt this was “a Kiyoka thing to do,” because he had treated her this way ever since they’d first met. That’s just the type of person her fiancé was… But was it okay for her to then want to learn even more about him?

They walked in silence for a little while, then they both arrived at a sparsely populated park.

The leaves on the row of trees were almost all fallen, with their bare branches looking forlorn. It appeared that with the seasonal weather, the number of people in areas like this had dropped dramatically.

“Um, Kiyoka?”

Miyo quietly spoke up, at this point feeling slightly anxious about how far he planned on going.

At this, Kiyoka stopped, and without turning around—

“Guess we should take a bit of break.”

—mumbled, as if talking to himself.

They sat side by side on a long bench. There were about three fists worth of open space between them.

Miyo glanced over at her unusually quiet fiancé.

Is he in a bad mood…? No, it doesn’t look like it.

Judging from Kiyoka's expression, which she had gotten markedly better at reading, he looked less upset or angry, and more precisely like something was weighing on his mind.

However, Miyo couldn't figure why exactly this was so.

"Kiyoka."

"What?"

She instinctively spoke to him again, but he replied without looking her way.

"Are you worried about something?"

She got the feeling it was the right thing to ask.

The story she had heard from Godou came to mind. The story about Godou's father.

Nevertheless, she didn't have the courage to suddenly bring the topic up, so she made a half-hearted attempt at broaching the subject with him.

"Did Godou tell you something?"

Kiyoka folded his arms and quietly closed his eyes as he answered Miyo with a question of his own.

There had clearly been something off about his demeanor during their visit. Kiyoka must have been aware of it himself. Perhaps he thought that Miyo's curiosity about his unusual behavior would then prompt her to ask Godou about it.

Miyo came out with a straight answer, worried that she had danced around the subject like a coward.

"He told me a little bit."

"……Did he now?"

"Kiyoka, I—"

She cut herself off, alarmed.

Miyo was letting herself get carried away and asking about something she shouldn't, wasn't she?

No, I can't let myself shrink back from this.

If she did anger him or make him sad, then she'd apologize. It was far past the point where waiting hesitantly would solve anything.

"Would you prefer if I didn't know more about your past?"

When she looked at him straight in the eyes and asked him this candidly, she could tell Kiyoka was taken back in surprise.

"Miyo……"

"I want to know more about you. It doesn't have to be everything. It's just that you know so much about me, so I want to learn more about you, too."

Meeting Kaoruko had made her realize something.

The Kiyoka who she knew, while indeed real and genuine, was only a facet of his whole personhood. Even though she was his betrothed, Miyo knew less about him than anyone around her.

Still, it feels a bit like something I can't intentionally ask him about.

There wasn't anything Miyo could do with the information, even if she did learn more about him. Nevertheless.

Kiyoka gently laid his hand over Miyo's, which was resting on the space in the bench between them. His hard, yet warm palm always soothed her.

"I'd be thrilled……though maybe that's not the best way to put it."

"Huh?"

"I'd like nothing more than to tell you everything there is to know about me."

At last, Kiyoka turned his beautiful blue eyes her way.

He was worried about her. Up until now, she had just been taking advantage of his consideration. Fully wrapped up in dealing with her own self, and constantly having Kiyoka adapting himself for her.

But things couldn't keep going like this. She wanted them to both support each other going forward, which was exactly why she wanted to get a better understanding of him if she could.

"Still, there's no fun to be had from leaning more about me, you know."

"I-it doesn't have to be fun!"

Kiyoka let out a throaty laugh.

"Hah-hah-hah!"

He chuckled loudly, as if he couldn't contain himself.

It was Miyo's first time seeing him react like this.

"Sh-sheesh! Why're are you laughing?"

"Right, sorry. It just appears like I had misunderstood a few things."

"Misunderstood?"

Kiyoka calmed himself down and nodded before he cleared up Miyo's confusion.

"It's pathetic, but I was much more unsettled by this latest incident than I thought I would be. I didn't want to let you see me looking so shaken up."

"What……?"

"It was silly of me to put up a front, right? But the truth is, I was worried that you might get fed up with me or grow disgusted with me."

Miyo unconsciously fluttered her eyes at the unexpected explanation.

Fed up? Grow disgusted? There was no way she'd feel anything of the sort.

"Though, I did believe that there was no way you'd leave me."

"Of course. I've decided for myself that even if you wanted us to go our separate ways, or if there was some event that kept us apart, I would pursue you no matter what.

The sincere words came together with shocking eloquence.

She would never leave his side. Saying that out loud reaffirmed her resolve.

"Don't worry. I won't let go of your hand, either."

"……Thank you."

The two gazed at each other for a moment, before Miyo, the first to come to her senses, remembered something very important.

Maybe it'll be okay to ask him now.

She couldn't let this moment end without confirming things for herself. Nevertheless, it was something she found hard to ask about, and she didn't especially want to discuss it in the first place.

Steeling herself, she began to speak.

"Kiyoka."

"What?"

"Were you and Kaoruko in love with each other?"

Kiyoka's smile instantly froze over.

"……What makes you think that?"

“Because there was talk about you two getting engaged. Kaoruko is wonderful and pretty… As far as I can see, you seem like you wouldn’t be particularly opposed to such an idea, either.”

Kiyoka’s eyes, which had been smiling gently moments before, quickly grew frightening. Meanwhile, Miyo’s voice grew quieter and quieter as she continued.

Was it just her imagination, or did it feel like the already cold outside air had chilled even further?

“I didn’t seem that opposed, huh?”

“Um, I mean—”

“Sorry. This is my fault.”

Miyo was terrified that she might have angered him. Instead, Kiyoka bowed to her, leaving her flabbergasted.

“Kiyoka, why are you apologizing…?”

“There’s nothing between Jinnouchi and me. Not now, nor in the past.”

“Huh? But…”

They looked like they were on such good terms together, but in truth, there had been nothing between them?

Kaoruko was different from the noblewomen Kiyoka despised. While beautiful herself, she was nice to others and charming. For Kiyoka, there was nothing to particularly dislike about her, and even now, remained friendly with her.

My chest hurts…

Miyo was shocked at how tremendously relieved she was to hear there had been nothing between the two. Yet, the more and more she thought about it, the more she couldn’t understand why the marriage offer had been called off.

“I’m sorry if I made you uneasy. I was in the wrong for not explaining things from the start… Actually, I’ve had the feeling like you’ve wanted to talk to me about something lately, but was this really what has been bothering you?”

“Yes.”

She had been too scared to ask. The anxiety about the possibility he might answer by telling her they had been in love once was too much for her to bear.

“*Haaah*, so I was overthinking things again…”

“What?”

“Nothing. Let’s head back.”

“Okay.

As they returned to the military headquarters, Kiyoka murmured something to her.

“If there’s something you want to know about me, Miyo, I want you to ask me right away next time. It might be impossible for me to answer everything when it comes to my work, but I’ll be as honest as I can.”

“I will!”

If this was how things were going to play out, Miyo wished she hadn’t scared herself off of asking him sooner. Overjoyed, she gained a spring in her step.

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After practically fleeing the hospital, Kaoruko returned to the station. Lunch hadn’t started yet, so she still had some time off.

She’d ended up wandering into the empty cafeteria and was now staring down at the surface of the water in her cup.

“So, tell me. Are you still in love with the commander?”

She replayed Godou’s words again and again.

Kaoruko knew from the very start that these feelings of hers would never ever come to fruition.

That was why she had given up on them back when she was a teenager.

Everything clicked when the person she had yearned for flatly refused her marriage proposal—she was unwanted. She cried for days on end afterward, too depressed to eat.

However, she persuaded herself that Kiyoka had turned down all the marriage offers that had come his way, so if she could at least stay by his side as a comrade-in-arms, then she could remain special to him. That was how she got back on her feet.

But despite it all.

She had been unable to watch on in silence when a woman who was loved appeared before her.

I’m an ugly disgrace.

Kaoruko was sure that her behavior must have hurt Miyo.

Still, she couldn’t bring herself to stop, because seeing Miyo in pain brought her a sense of relief. Controlled by her envy, she found herself so ugly and detestable that it made her sick to her stomach.

After actually meeting Miyo Saimori and spending time with her, things truly sank in. Kaoruko could never beat Miyo.

I’ve lost.

The type of femininity and grace that Miyo had…her tranquility, sincerity, and kindness, were all qualities Kaoruko lacked.

If Miyo was the woman Kiyoka loved, then no matter how much effort she gave, she’d never be able to catch his attention. Right after

she met Miyo, she said they “had a lot in common,” but as women, they were total opposites.

The corners of her eyes grew hot. The reflection in her cup of water grew hazy and distorted.

If only I was more ladylike. If only I could become more like Miyo…

Then, maybe, Kiyoka might even look her way, too.

She detested herself for fantasizing about such impossibilities.

“Jinnouchi.”

Right as warm droplets fell down onto her hands, Kaoruko looked up as she heard her name.

“…Yabunaga.”

Unbeknownst to her, the master of the cafeteria, former soldier, and current chef Yabunaga had approached her at some point. He was standing by her side, looking down at her.

“Wh-what is it?”

Lunch was approaching, so normally he’d have his hands full in the kitchen.

At Kaoruko’s question, Yabunaga silently held out the white handkerchief he was holding.

“Can’t have you crying in a place like this right before the other bastards file in here to eat.”

His actual words were vitriolic, but his poorly concealed thoughtfulness came through to Kaoruko, considering he’d left his kitchen during the busiest time of day to come personally hand her a handkerchief.

“…Thank you.”

Verbalizing her gratitude sent more tears spilling from her eyes. Giving in to his kindness, she accepted the handkerchief and wiped away the falling drops.

In response, Yabunaga grunted and wordlessly pointed with his chin toward the entrance to the cafeteria.

“Huh?”

When Kaoruko turned to look, there she saw Miyo peeking into the room and observing the two of them.

“You’re back early,” Kaoruko began after waving the reticent Miyo into the cafeteria and motioning her to sit down beside her.

Yabunaga had cleaned away the cup that had been in front of her, and in its place were two teacups filled with warm green tea.

“We took a bit of a detour on the way back, so I don’t think we’re that early…,” Miyo hesitantly replied while tilting her head.

Kaoruko imagined that they must’ve enjoyed a friendly stroll together after their hospital visit. The wounds in her heart festered even more.

No matter how much she despised herself for being so disgusting, she couldn’t quell her jealousy.

“Um, Kaoruko.”

“What?”

“…I’m sorry.”

Kaoruko had braced herself for what Miyo would say next, but she couldn’t believe her ears when an apology fell from her lips.

Why are you *the one apologizing?*

It was clear as day that Kaoruko was the one who needed to apologize. Not Miyo.

This thought made her more and more irritated, even though she understood her resentment was misguided and unjustified. She had taken pains to avoid openly revealing the jealousy in her heart, but even this was starting to feel ridiculous.

"Why?"

Her voice came out lower than expected as she asked this of Miyo.

However, Miyo didn't seem to notice the state her bodyguard was in, and she guiltily explained the reason behind her apology.

"I was mistaken. When I heard that you had been a potential marriage candidate for Kiyoka, I thought maybe……um, that you had an especially close relationship together."

Kaoruko instinctively balled her hand into a tight fist.

Oh, how she wished she did have the sort of special relationship Miyo spoke about. How many times had she dreamed about it?

"I was mistaken, and I think that……I was probably jealous of you, Kaoruko."

The moment the words reached Kaoruko's ears, her emotions bubbled up all at once.

"Why?!" Kaoruko shouted, shooting to her feet and knocking her seat to the floor behind her. Miyo was taken aback.

Her pretty face annoyed Kaoruko even further. Whether it was all irrational or not, she couldn't keep her feelings in check.

"You weren't mistaken at all. Don't wave it away like that. Sure, there was no special relationship between us, but…but, I had feelings for him!"

"……"

"He's hard on both himself and other people, yet strong and deeply caring toward his comrades. For a long time, I admired Mr. Kudou for

all of this. I was attracted to him. From long, long before you showed up!”

Unable to control the torrent of emotion spilling out of her, Kaoruko slammed Miyo with all her pent-up discontent.

“The reason you were jealous is because I made you jealous. I envied you first, and purposefully tried to show off that I understood Mr. Kudou a lot better than you.”

She mentioned stories from the past Miyo likely didn’t know about and tried making the gap between them evident whenever she could.

Kaoruko had known Kiyoka for longer, so she had more memories of him than Miyo, and she knew more about him, too.

She hadn’t been able to accept that Miyo stood in a place that she could never reach.

“Kaoruko…”

“So why then, why are you apologizing? What am I supposed to do if you apologize when I’m the one in the wrong?”

Kaoruko was clearly trying to come up with any fault she could levy Miyo’s way. Even someone like Miyo would get angry and confused by being yelled at like this.

Pent-up anger, sadness, and guilt all mixed together inside Kaoruko. Her emotions in chaos, she sank lifelessly to the floor.

“I’m sorry…”

The words of apology came out naturally along with her tears. Working herself into anger and tears, she couldn’t stand how bothersome and pitiful she was being.

Miyo gradually began to speak as Kaoruko sat still, unable to lift her head up and look at her.

“Kaoruko, I think that I probably know how you’re feeling right now. Ever since I first met you, I’ve been more jealous than I could bear.”

“……Of what? There’s nothing to envy about me.”

There wasn’t a single thing about her that Miyo should’ve been jealous of. Nevertheless, she slowly shook her head.

“I wanted to stand as an equal with Kiyoka like you. I can’t fight at all, and I still can’t use my Gift very well. That was why I was so jealous of you, Kaoruko.”

A slightly rough and cracked hand, very far removed from the average young noblewoman’s hand, reached out before Kaoruko.

“Will you become my friend one more time?”

“……”

“The two of us might be a bit alike after all. But I’m sure we both became so jealous and frustrated because we each have something the other lacks.”

She stretched out her hand before Kaoruko. Miyo’s voice, as peaceful as still water, seeped into Kaoruko’s chest, as if to slowly begin healing her frayed heart.

Aaah, there really…wasn’t any opening for me.

From the very start.

She had realized it a long time ago. That Miyo was more suited to stand by Kiyoka’s side and that she was a woman Kaoruko couldn’t ever compete with.

“…It’s hard to understand other people, but we’ve already showed plenty of ourselves to each other by now. Don’t you think that will let us get much closer than we were before?”

Was it okay for Kaoruko to take this hand?

She remained silent, unable to come up with an answer.

There's one more thing I'm hiding from her.

If this was brought to light, Kaoruko was certainly not going to get through things unscathed. A secret much graver, and more wicked, than the nastiness she had directed at Miyo.

If she took this hand, Miyo might become the friend of a criminal.

However, she couldn't hold out against the temptation. Before she knew it, she had taken Miyo's delicate hand in her own.

"If you can forgive me, I'd like to remain friends."

Miyo gently smiled at Kaoruko's truly heartfelt words.

"I can. I'm looking forward to our friendship, Kaoruko."

While she felt like she would be crushed under the happiness of their mutual understanding and her strong sense of guilt, Kaoruko, still on the verge of tears, smiled back.

⚜ *CHAPTER 5* ⚜

Without Fear

Arata hopped from place to place all over the capital.

After vowing to capture Naoshi Usui, he took a break from his public job as a negotiator and concentrated on following his target's trail.

The imperial capital had gotten remarkedly colder; winter was in full swing.

His breath came out in a white cloud, and his fingertips grew less flexible and numb in the cold even from inside his gloves.

Arata had gone on his own around places that might be connected to his quarry—whether it was land connected to the Usui family, or the area surrounding the Gifted Communion bases previously exposed by the military—and gathered any clues he could find.

Unfortunately, however, he had yet to gain any intel that could point to Usui's current location.

That said, one thing has gotten quite clear.

He mingled with the crowd, quickening his pace toward his destination.

Usui could pretty up his ambitions all he wanted, but at the end of the day, he wanted nothing more than to overthrow the government. In which case, there was someone the man would definitely put in his sights.

The emperor himself.

If Usui wished to control the empire as he saw fit, he would need to deftly handle the emperor—whether that meant killing him or keeping him alive—and take his authority for his own.

Currently, the one actually controlling the nation was the Imperial Prince Takaihito, but even Usui would have trouble reaching him. The Ministry of the Imperial Household had gathered their collective power to form a barrier around the young ruler.

It repelled not only Gifts and occult arts of a similar nature, but also repelled a specified kind of matter entirely. Only those inside the barrier could alter these specifications, and once they established Usui as someone to keep out, it would be impossible for him to pass through.

Arata still didn't think this protection was absolute, but it was nothing to sneeze at.

In which case, something needed to be done about the emperor first. At the very least, Arata thought so.

Though the possibility still remains that he might try to get his hands on Miyo before going after the emperor.

In some senses, Miyo's security was even tighter than Takaihito's.

Not only was the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station a den of Gift-wielding warriors, but it currently had a barrier around it similar to the one surrounding Takaihito. No matter how powerful Usui's Gift may have been, it would be almost impossible for him to get his hands on her.

In other words, if something was going to go wrong, it would begin with the emperor.

The emperor resided in a small residence on the outskirts of the Imperial Palace.

While it was on the same grounds as Takaihito's own residence, the emperor had already grown frail, losing his ability to move and his Gift of Divine Revelation. Consequently, he was less well guarded than Takaihito.

In order to erect a barrier like the one surrounding Takaihito's residence or the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, it required at least ten or more practitioners, along with just as many people to maintain it. The wider the barrier became, the greater the number of practitioners it took to maintain it, so it wasn't realistic to place one around both men.

With the Imperial Palace's gate now in view from his position, Arata casually cast his eyes around the area.

Are those…?

Unsurprisingly, he sensed several anomalies mixed in with the regular passersby.

"The artificial Gift-users?" Arata said to himself with a frown.

The unusual presences would be quite difficult to notice without a Gift. Indeed, the Imperial Palace gatekeepers weren't reacting to it at all.

Still, I can't help but say the Ministry of the Imperial Household's response here is far too naïve, to have this level of defense while supposedly being on guard against the Gifted Communion.

At the very least, multiple Gift-users or practitioners needed to be stationed on guard.

The Ministry of the Imperial Household may not have truly understood just how dangerous Naoshi Usui was, but to speak bluntly, their defenses were full of holes.

That was as far as Arata's thoughts got before they were interrupted.

“What—?!”

A singular automobile stopped near the gate, and a frail man in a kimono, propped up by a few servants, slowly emerged from the Imperial Palace grounds.

Arata was very familiar with the man. In fact, Arata had once made a deal with him to further his personal ambitions.

His Majesty the emperor…!

Faced with this suspicious and ridiculous scene of the emperor flanked by just a few people as he walked out of the palace, the gate guards seemed almost completely oblivious to it all.

Is he here? Is Naoshi Usui nearby?

Usui must have been manipulating the guards’ and pedestrians’ senses of sight.

In which case, the man must have been somewhere he could directly watch this scene unfold.

Where?

Though he looked around, Arata didn’t spot Usui. If Usui’s Gift made it impossible for others to detect his presence, then there was nothing he could have done to begin with.

There are, at least, some methods of opposing Gifts from the Usuba family…

He had successfully found them by poring over any and all of the materials in the Usuba house and desperately researching the subject. Since the information was gleaned from old records in the Usuba main house, Usui was unlikely to know about them.

However, if Arata didn’t use these methods carefully, there was a chance Usui could catch on to what Arata was doing and come up with ways of countering them.

In the meantime, the emperor and the men with him got into the parked automobile.

“Tch!”

Arata gave a rare click of his tongue, then created some familiars.

Whatever the case, having arrived on foot, Arata had no means to pursue the car. For now, his only option was to have a familiar follow the car while he himself followed, belatedly, from behind.

He’d created two familiars.

One utilized elaborate camouflage arts and was sent to follow the automobile. The other was marked with the Usuba seal to make it clear it came from Arata and was sent flying to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station bearing an urgent letter of warning.

With this, Kiyoka ought to be spurred into action somehow.

Seeing the automobile take off without anyone stopping it for questioning, Arata started running.

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A few days had passed since Miyo and Kaoruko decided to build their relationship back up from square one.

The season had firmly shifted into winter, but Miyo’s situation remained totally unchanged. She commuted to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station with Kiyoka almost every day, doing chores while she was there.

While sweeping and cleaning up the corridors, Miyo looked over at Kaoruko doing the same work a bit farther away from her.

Kaoruko was all smiles back then, so why…

She had confessed to being jealous of Miyo and doing things to hurt her. Miyo had forgiven her and had thought with it, Kaoruko's troubles had been laid to rest.

However, even as she acted brave and tough, there were occasional moments where Miyo caught a flash of melancholy in her expression.

Miyo couldn't claim she felt truly spirited herself, either. She had no way of knowing when Usui could appear in front of her, and she felt the cold stares from the soldiers directed her way. She had a mountain of troubles on her mind.

Nevertheless, Kaoruko seemed like she was anxious and driven back into a corner.

On this seemingly tranquil day, one just like any other, an incident occurred just before noontime.

Finished with the cleaning and done helping out in the kitchen with lunch prep work, Miyo was in the kitchenette with Kaoruko.

She filled the teakettle with water, and before long, its whistling sound filled the room.

"Do you think we should skip the teacakes? It'll be lunchtime soon and all…"

"……"

"Kaoruko?"

She posed the question to Kaoruko, box of sweets in hand, but she didn't get an answer. When Miyo turned to look at her friend beside her, she found the woman staring off into space, looking as if her mind was elsewhere.

"Kaoruko."

"Huh?! O-oh, sorry…"

When Miyo addressed her again, Kaoruko finally realized that Miyo was calling her name.

Kaoruko always tackled work with earnest, and Miyo knew well enough that she never had her guard down when she served as her bodyguard. However, at that moment, her mind had clearly been elsewhere.

Concern swelled in Miyo's chest as she wondered what was bothering her.

"Kaoruko, are you feeling under the weather?"

"N-no, not at all. I'm just fine."

"But……"

If she wasn't feeling sick, then did she have something on her mind? Miyo wanted to ask, but it was a hard thing for her to do.

Kaoruko loved Kiyoka. She had since long before Kiyoka and Miyo ever met.

However, the woman Kiyoka had chosen was not her but Miyo. Because of that, Miyo wavered about getting involved in Kaoruko's troubles, despite how close they were.

Though she considered Kaoruko's troubles to be something completely unrelated, she still wasn't inclined to pursue the answer.

"Sorry for worrying you. I-it's so peaceful here, I probably just let my mind wander a bit. *Ha-ha-ha*."

She laughed just like she always did, but it came off as a bit awkward and strained.

However, if Kaoruko herself was talking like this, then she must have something weighing on her mind that even a close friend couldn't get out of her.

Maybe I'm the only one who feels like we've become friends.

If so, that too would be rather sad in and of itself.

Ultimately, she placed three teacups filled with green tea on a tray and the two of them headed for her fiancé's office.

"Kiyoka, it's Miyo."

When she knocked on the door and announced herself, she immediately heard a reply of "Come in."

Kiyoka was processing a large stack of documents as usual.

Currently, the Gifted Communion had not made any major moves, but the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit still had their regular duties to attend to—handling any incidents that involved supernatural creatures. Enough then, at that very moment, there were soldiers out on excursions to exterminate Grotesqueries.

He must be awfully busy…

Miyo gently placed the teacup on top of his desk.

"Why don't you have a bit of a break, Kiyoka? It's almost time for lunch."

"Sure," Kiyoka replied half-heartedly, his hands show no signs of stopping. If Miyo pressed further, she knew she'd be getting in the way of his work.

She exchanged glances with Kaoruko, and both women moved away from around his desk and sat themselves down on the office sofa.

"Nice and warm."

The hot green tea permeated Miyo's chilled body. Sitting next to her, Kaoruko also slowly took sips from her teacup, the gravity Miyo saw in her expression earlier totally gone.

That was when it came.

Kiyoka suddenly stood up and threw open the window.

“Kiyoka?”

When she looked up to see what was wrong, she saw something white abruptly flutter in through the window. Even Miyo had seen these before. It was a paper familiar often used by Gift-users to communicate with one another.

The familiar flew once around the room, riding the wind, before it landed in Kiyoka’s open hand.

Kiyoka immediately ran his eyes over what Miyo assumed was a message written on the familiar.

“This can’t be…”

Almost exactly as he gazed at the familiar in shock, there came a furious knocking on his door.

“Commander! It’s Mukadeyama!”

“Come in.”

Entering into the room, Mukadeyama looked to be in a terrible panic, his face pale.

“……!”

Miyo heard a gasp from nearby and turned to Kaoruko.

“Kaoruko?”

“I-it’s nothing…”

Despite her insistence she was okay, both Kaoruko’s voice and hands were trembling to a shocking degree. It was obvious to Miyo that she was terrified.

Does Kaoruko know something that I don’t?

Perhaps there was actually some major incident going on that didn’t concern Miyo at all, and she alone hadn’t realized the gravity

of the situation. While it wasn't entirely out of the question, something definitely still felt strange.

However, her train of thought was then interrupted.

Kiyoka fiercely slammed his hand down on his desk, the loud sound reverberating through the office.

"How dare they lay a hand on His Majesty…!"

Anger showed through in his low growl.

Something happened to His Majesty?

Currently, the emperor was basically confined away under the orders of the Imperial Prince Takaihito. Nevertheless, the man was closely tied to Miyo's fate.

Had Naoshi Usui finally started to make his move?

Looking at Kiyoka and Mukadeyama's grave faces, Miyo's anxieties made her heart start pounding in her chest.

"We're currently investigating His Majesty's whereabouts. As soon as we find—"

"No, Usuba happened to be at the Imperial Palace when it happened and is in pursuit. We should know where they're headed in due time."

By Usuba, Miyo assumed he meant Arata.

She hadn't personally seen him in a while, but he had supposedly been pursuing the Gifted Communion on his own. That would mean Usui and the Gifted Communion *had* made their move after all.

Miyo held her breath and listened in on their conversation.

"……Can we trust him?"

Mukadeyama's face soured the moment Arata's surname was invoked.

“Do you think he’s suspicious?”

“I don’t know much about Usuba the individual. As such, I think it’s only natural for me to imagine the possibility that Usui and Usuba are conspiring together.”

Miyo got the feeling that Mukadeyama had looked her way for a split second.

She thought she had done everything she could to prove herself to him, but it appeared that still hadn’t been enough to earn his trust. That was the meaning behind his glance.

Kiyoka didn’t say anything to Mukadeyama. Instead, he fell deep into thought, a grave look on his face.

Something happened to the emperor, and Arata’s on his trail.

In that case, what about Kiyoka? What about the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit?

Before she realized it, she had stepped in between Mukadeyama and Kiyoka’s conversation.

“I’ll be right here, Kiyoka. So His Majesty needs—”

“Miyo.”

Her overprotective fiancé frowned and shook his head.

“But I think that His Majesty needs your help.”

The thought of being separated from Kiyoka while she was being targeted herself made her extremely uneasy. However, as Gift-users, beholden to the words of the emperor, they couldn’t stand idly by and do nothing when their lord was in danger.

This was the answer Miyo had arrived at, but Mukadeyama frowned in disapproval.

“Please know your place. This isn’t a problem an outsider like you should be weighing in on.”

Miyo’s reflexively stiffened at his harsh reply.

“……My apologies.”

Mukadeyama was right. It was impudent of her to voice her opinions about their military work.

When she gave it more thought, both Kiyoka and Mukadeyama knew full well that they needed to go to the emperor’s aid. Given that they were confronting the Gifted Communion, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, able to oppose them with supernatural powers of their own, were the only ones who could stop them.

It really had been a totally unnecessary outburst.

Kiyoka slowly began to speak.

“Mukadeyama.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You stay here. I’m leaving the station’s defenses in your hands.”

“Wha—!”

Mukadeyama widened his eyes at his superior’s order.

“Why, sir?! I understand that defending the station is important, but I’ve been tracking down the Gifted Communion, too! The logical move would be to have my unit accompany you!”

Faced with his subordinate’s shouts, Kiyoka remained exceedingly calm.

“I’m entrusting you with it because it’s so important. Any objections?”

“No, sir…”

As Kiyoka spoke, he patted Mukadeyama—face twisted with frustration—on his shoulder and whispered something in his ear.

Miyo noticed that Mukadeyama's startled gaze shifted to Kaoruko, who was waiting in the wings behind her.

Kaoruko…?

Remaining silent this whole time, Miyo turned to look and was similarly perplexed.

Kaoruko hadn't even noticed the stares Miyo and Mukadeyama were directing her way. Her face had turned deathly pale as she stared at the ground, subtly trembling.

Miyo thought she had been acting a bit strange, but this was a little too abnormal.

"Kaoruko, you look awful. Perhaps you should take some time to rest in the first aid room?"

When Miyo spoke up, unable to stay quiet, Kaoruko sluggishly raised her head.

"I'm fine."

Her tone was feeble, and her lips were trembling.

Miyo remained worried, but her hands were tied if Kaoruko herself insisted she was okay.

Perhaps Squad Leader Mukadeyama was tasked with staying behind to look after Kaoruko, too?

As Miyo wrapped her arm around the other woman to support her, she looked over to the other two, Mukadeyama heaving a resigned sigh and Kiyoka lightly nodding his head.

"Double-check where the guards are deployed, Mukadeyama. I'll organize the squad to pursue His Majesty."

"Understood."

Mukadeyama quickly departed the office.

Kiyoka took the saber from its upright leaning position and strapped it to his waist, wrapping himself up in his winter coat and walking up in front of Miyo.

“Jinnouchi, you’re to follow Mukadeyama’s orders and work to protect the station.”

“…Yes, sir.”

Kaoruko, her face still pale, departed the office with shaky, unsteady steps. She looked so helpless, it set Miyo’s heart on edge.

“Miyo.”

“Yes?”

After watching Kaoruko depart, Miyo turned back toward her fiancé.

“You heard it all. I’ll be leaving the station from here. The barrier’s still up, but I can’t guarantee it’ll hold forever. Please be careful… Forgive me for being unable to stay by your side.”

“Don’t be sorry. I understand.”

She was scared. Imagining herself coming face-to-face with Naoshi Usui again terrified her.

However, she had made up her mind. She had to accept that some things just weren’t possible. That’s why Miyo would do absolutely everything she could, even though she lacked any fighting strength, to ensure that Kiyoka could return home with peace of mind.

Miyo quelled her fear and smiled.

“I’ll be here, safely awaiting your return. So go, Kiyoka, but please be careful.”

He brought out his arms, pulled her in, and wrapped them around her.

His arms were powerful yet very gentle.

“I don’t want to leave you.”

“……Kiyoka.”

She didn’t feel bashful in the slightest. Miyo simply gave in to her feelings and wrapped her own arms around Kiyoka’s back.

“If anything were to happen to you, I…”

Kiyoka may have been feared as a ruthless soldier, but even he had things he was afraid of.

Terror was the same for everyone.

For a few moments, as if to confirm each other’s existence, as if in prayer, they silently embraced each other.

Kiyoka, accompanied by two squads, set off from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

Miyo, together with Kaoruko and Mukadeyama, as well as the men in his squad, barricaded themselves in the dojo and remained on standby.

Outside, another squad was guarding the station gate.

Kaoruko seemed to have calmed down significantly compared to before, but the color was still drained from her face, and she remained quiet.

“I’ll ask that you make sure not to act out of turn,” Mukadeyama harshly warned Miyo.

While he individually felt like Miyo and the Usubas couldn’t be trusted, she could tell that beyond that, his warning had come from

his strong sense of responsibility toward the duty he'd been entrusted with.

Miyo nodded without any objection.

She held a protective charm Kiyoka had given her. It was apparently a stronger, improved version of the one he had given her previously. Though, he hadn't elaborated about how and where it was strengthened, or what sort of effect it had.

Miyo sat on her legs in the center of the dojo while the squad members encircled her in a defensive ring. There was only one entrance into the building. Everyone had their eyes fixed on it to ensure they wouldn't overlook even the smallest change.

Miyo clutched the charm in her hands, praying to the gods above.

He'll be okay. He'll be fine.

Kiyoka was sure to be back at her side soon. As long as she waited here like this until he did, they would be able to return back to their old daily lives.

The dojo was silent.

Everyone present was holding their breath, and even Miyo could feel their concentration, straining their ears to sense any potential abnormality.

Then, her prayers in vain, the silence was shattered.

"The barrier's been broken!"

At Mukadeyama's shout, everyone rose to their feet and stood on guard.

Miyo rose a bit slower than the rest, her limbs stiff with nerves.

The barrier? How?

Kiyoka hadn’t claimed the barrier was absolutely impenetrable. But this was the worst possible scenario. The chance of such a rigid barrier breaking was almost zero.

“Well, well, well, I didn’t expect you all to be here—and to give me such a fiery welcome.”

The instant she heard the voice, Miyo’s heart pounded loudly in her chest.

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Kiyoka led his squad members and rushed to the location Arata had given him.

The emperor wasn’t in his residence.

When Kiyoka received a note from Arata reading, “I witnessed the emperor being led from the Imperial Palace,” and when he heard from Mukadeyama that Takaihito had contacted them, he’d doubted his own eyes and ears. He thought there must have been some sort of mistake.

But the combination of a direct address from Takaihito himself and Arata’s message confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that something had happened to the emperor.

Once the emperor was involved, Kiyoka would have to get involved, too, since he was a unit commander.

“Usuba, what’s the current situation?”

When he arrived at the designated location with his men in tow, Arata was already there waiting.

“His Majesty is down this road.”

Arata pointed toward the main street that stretched out in the direction of the sea. When Kiyoka considered that the emperor’s

destination, or rather, the destination of those who captured him, involved the sea, he couldn't prevent his thoughts from going in the worst direction possible.

If they escaped onto a boat, it would be difficult to pursue them.

"They don't seem intent on assassinating His Majesty by the looks of things. I get the impression they're treating him as respectfully as they can. Nor do they appear to be heading toward the port. This is just a guess, but I think they're heading toward the imperial family's vacation home," Arata surmised, after sharing the sight of the familiar that was tailing after them.

Even Kiyoka had no objections to his assessment.

As things stood now, neither Usui nor the Gifted Communion had anything to gain by assassinating the emperor. The only motive he could come up with was that Usui bore a grudge against the man, since he'd created the circumstance that led to Usui being separated from Sumi Usuba.

Are they using the vacation home as their hideout?

The imperial family's vacation home was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Imperial Household.

Houjou's activities proved that there were cracks in the surveillance of Gift-users, so Kiyoka figured he should assume the Gifted Communion's influence was already spreading within the government.

"Have you seen Usui?"

"At this point, no. However, when the emperor was led out from the palace, it was clear that Usui's Gift was at work. It's safe to say that he's involved with this in some way or another."

Hearing all of this, Kiyoka brought his hand up to his chin and began to think.

Should they really keep chasing after the emperor? A demand from Takaihito himself meant he had to obey his wishes. However, he still couldn't help feeling that he was walking into a trap.

Using the emperor as bait to go after Takaihito and Miyo. Definitely a possibility.

This was why back at the station, he had left Mukadeyama in charge, someone with excellent skills who he could trust. He was the next best person with Godou indisposed.

Although if Usui did actually attack the station, no one would stand a chance without Gift-users of Kiyoka's or Arata's skill. He'd bring the whole station under his control almost immediately. In that regard, Mukadeyama and Kaoruko were still not strong enough for the job.

Thus, a situation where both Kiyoka and Arata were pulled away to chase down the emperor was less than ideal.

"Major, why don't you head back to the station?"

Just then, Arata broached this very subject.

Kiyoka couldn't get a read on any of the emotions behind Arata's inscrutable expression. Even since learning that the man who claimed to be the founder of the Gifted Communion was Naoshi Usui, Arata's character had changed. Or rather, he had dropped his facade.

"…That's impossible. I was the person put in charge here. I can't leave the scene."

Kiyoka understood that Arata was thinking along the same lines as himself, but he was unable to go along with the proposal.

"But surely you understand yourself, Major, that there's a chance His Majesty's abduction is just a feint. Actually, that way of putting it might not actually apply to this situation, since gaining control of the

emperor, and by extension the entire empire itself, is likely just as beneficial for them. That said, their true objective is likely—”

“Miyo.”

Despite himself, Kiyoka’s voice came out in a low growl.

“Exactly. While Usui is estranged from the Usubas, he’s stubbornly hung up on my family more than anyone else. That’s why Miyo is of immeasurable value to him.”

Pausing, Arata turned toward Kiyoka.

“Your decision, Major.”

There was a strong gleam of resolve in Arata’s eyes.

When he looked at him, Kiyoka started to feel pathetic for being bound by his duty, unable to immediately declare that he would protect Miyo. However, Kiyoka had made the choice himself to join the military, fully knowing it could lead to such predicaments.

“I’m—”

Not returning to the station.

It was right as the words were about to leave his lips. A sole military vehicle, closing in on them with tremendous speed, suddenly stopped in front of Kiyoka and the others, the brakes screeching.

“Who is it?”

He hadn’t heard of anyone else coming to their location besides those already gathered there.

After he asked for their identity, a large man dressed in a military uniform stepped out from the automobile.

“It’s me, Kiyoka.”

“Major General, sir…?!”

That big, stout physique—this was unquestionably the man who oversaw the entire Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, Masashi Ookaito himself.

Ookaito stood imposingly in front of Kiyoka's group and barked his orders.

"This is a command from Prince Takaihito. Major Kudou, you are to immediately return to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station. Everyone else will be under my command from this moment forth. We shall pursue the rebels who have kidnapped His Majesty."

"But, Major General, sir."

The order was more than Kiyoka could ever ask for, but that was all the more reason why he found it unbelievable. He couldn't help but speak up.

In response to Kiyoka's objection, which normally would have deserved admonishment, Ookaito grinned.

"Prince Takaihito has ordered me to apologize to you on his behalf. Telling you to pursue the emperor was a mistake. He told me he was sorry for being late with the orders based on his Gift."

This order had come to Kiyoka as the result of Takaihito's Divine Revelation. In other words, it meant that through his clairvoyance, Takaihito had seen a future where Kiyoka's presence was needed at the station.

Usui's target had been Miyo after all.

"Then I shall humbly do as Prince Takaihito wishes."

Kiyoka bowed slightly to Ookaito, then turned around.

"Major, please keep Miyo safe."

Replying to the major general with a small nod, Kiyoka dashed off alone to his fiancée's side.

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Words like *startled* or *surprised* didn't begin to express Miyo's shock in that moment.

She heard the voice of someone she couldn't see, someone who shouldn't have been there at all.

"I've come for you, Miyo."

Her breath caught in her throat when she heard her name.

Despite the voice being audible from somewhere very close by, she had no idea where its owner—Naoshi Usui—was. The disturbing voice sent a chill up her spine.

Suddenly, Mukadeyama and Kaoruko both stepped in front of Miyo to shield her; there was nothing they could do against an opponent they couldn't see.

"Naoshi Usui! Where are you?! Show yourself!" Mukadeyama thundered. In an unexpected show of obedience, the owner of the voice revealed himself.

Gradually, the outline of a man's body came into view until it solidified into human form against the empty background.

Short, dark brown hair and round glasses. There was no denying it—the man was right there, wearing an inverness coat over his *hakama*, with the same ferocious gleam in his eyes.

"Thank you for the warm welcome. I thought it'd be a bit easier to slip in, but the security was lot tighter than I estimated. I suppose I should expect nothing less of Kiyoka Kudou."

Usui laughed as though something was amusing, making Miyo's skin crawl. The sound of someone gulping rang loudly in her ears.

Unbeknownst to everyone in the room, the door connecting the dojo to the outside had been thrown open. Usui had used his Gift to infiltrate the station right under their noses.

There were less than a few dozen long strides separating him from Miyo.

Although he had stopped advancing for now, everyone in the room was essentially at his mercy. They couldn't afford to make even the slightest of movements.

Just what am I supposed to do?

Usui's target was Miyo. At this rate, all of the soldiers in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit would have to put themselves at risk for her sake.

Since Kaoruko and Mukadeyama had been tasked with guarding her, they would claim that the soldiers had been prepared to give their lives. Though that was indeed true, did that mean all Miyo could do in the face of peril was to quietly sit and watch as other people gave their lives to protect her?

"How exactly did you get in?" Mukadeyama asked Usui, trying to buy time.

Although Usui surely must have recognized the man's true intent to draw things out as long as possible, he simply squinted his eyes in amusement.

Miyo could hardly believe the next words out of his mouth.

"It's simple, really. Someone inside the station fiddled with the barrier, letting me pass right on through."

"What…? What sort of nonsense…?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it's quite true. Though, I understand why you wouldn't want to believe it."

Miyo wrapped her arms around herself and desperately tried to control her trembling.

She didn't know how the barrier worked. However, it was clear enough to her that Usui was implying there was a traitor in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

"Are you trying to say that one of our own has secretly been communicating with the Gifted Communion?"

"Exactly. Was that too difficult for you to get through your heads?"

"Impossible…"

"You might want to look at the reality in front of you. The simple fact that I'm standing here must mean that someone told me how to break your barrier."

Mukadeyama fell silent in frustration and anger. Usui's smile widened at the sight.

"Shall I reveal to you just how I got inside?"

"……"

Slowly, he turned his malice-filled eyes to the collaborator.

At first, Miyo thought he was looking at her. However, she was mistaken.

What……?

Usui's gaze was locked onto Kaoruko.

"Kaoruko Jinnouchi. Thank you for your cooperation."

A stir rippled through the air.

Miyo felt her mind go totally blank.

Totally forgetting the powerful foe before them, the soldiers grew restless, and she could hear them whispering to each other.

“Kaoruko, why?”

Before she knew it, Miyo verbalized her dazed confusion.

Kaoruko jolted her shoulders with surprise before she gradually turned around to face Miyo behind her. Her gallantly beautiful face was paler than a sheet of paper.

“I—I…”

“Is this true, Jinnouchi?”

Mukadeyama pressed her, too, finding it impossible to hide the agitation in his voice. Her lips trembled as she responded, her entire body wracked with despair.

“I, um…”

“Go ahead, tell them the truth. Both my instructions to you and the situation I put you in. They might just sympathize with you, then.”

“……”

Kaoruko stayed silent, biting down on her trembling lips and hanging her head.

Everyone gazed at her with bated breath. They waited for her next words, not wanting to believe whatever she would say next.

But keeping quiet in this situation was no different from affirmation.

Mukadeyama’s roar echoed through the dojo.

“Jinnouchi! Say something for yourself!”

“I—I……I can’t say it.”

Kaoruko shook her head, trembling.

Usui delighted in watching from the sidelines as Miyo and the others fought amongst themselves.

“Honestly, you’d think telling them ‘you can’t say it’ is basically an admission of guilt. I’d tell them the whole story if I were you.”

Kaoruko grit her teeth at Usui’s sneering ridicule. The next moment, she raised her voice.

“Yes… Yes, it’s the truth! I sabotaged the barrier, just like you told me to!! So what about your promise?! Is my father safe?!”

Everyone else in the room was at a loss for words as they watched Kaoruko question Usui, her face still deathly pale. Even Mukadeyama was speechless while he stared at her.

As if to tear herself away from her bewildered comrades, Kaoruko kept her eyes locked on Usui.

“Of course, your father and your family’s dojo are unharmed. After all, I didn’t do anything to them in the first place.”

“Wh-what…?”

“I lied about taking your family home hostage from the very beginning. The fact you fell for it so easily saved me a lot of trouble.”

This much of the conversation was enough for Miyo to surmise that something had happened with Kaoruko and those she cared about.

After she arrived in the capital, Usui must have convinced her that he was holding her family hostage, threatened her, and forced her to obey his orders to sabotage the barrier and let him into the station.

No wonder she had looked so out of sorts ever since they’d received word that the emperor had been abducted.

Kaoruko knew that Kiyoka would then leave the station behind and Usui would arrive.

How awful…

She must have felt so much anguish being forced into betraying her comrades and having her family’s lives used as shields against her.

Miyo's chest ached at the thought she had spent each and every day harboring such an intense pain inside her.

Miyo was the target here. But that didn't mean she resented Kaoruko.

"Th-then what……? Wh-what was the point to any of this…?"

Kaoruko's legs buckled at the knees. No one had any words that they could give to her at that moment.

Only Mukadeyama erupted with anger, glowering at Usui.

"How dare you toy with people's hearts…"

"*Hah-hah-hah*. I was just having a bit of fun. It's certainly nothing to get so riled up about."

There was something off with this man. Miyo thought back to the past she had seen in her dreams.

Had her mother really loved a man like this? No—Miyo knew that couldn't possibly be true. Though she may have been unable to recall what Sumi looked like, she knew her mother had a heart of empathy and compassion.

Otherwise, she would have never sealed away Miyo's Gift in order to protect her from the Saimoris.

He made Kaoruko cry.

Usui hurt people on purpose. This was the man who wanted to stand at the top, to rule over the empire. The mere thought of this terrible vision of the future made Miyo's hair stand on end.

His grin of amusement remained unbroken.

"You all have put on quite an entertaining little show for me. But I think it's about time I get what I came here for…"

"You think I'll let you, bastard?"

Even the murderous, infuriated retort Mukadeyama barked at Usui failed to unsettle him in the slightest.

"It'll be quite simple."

Slowly, Usui drew a short sword out from the chest pocket of his coat and unsheathed it. Then he began to walk forward.

Mukadeyama, a cold sweat running down his body, took out the saber at his hip. In response, the other soldiers all drew their sabers in unison.

"Miss Fiancée, we'll engage him ourselves and buy time, so please use the opening to flee."

Miyo stared at Mukadeyama's back in shock.

"But—"

"That is our job. We're all here to make sure you aren't taken away. You need to steel yourself, too. What is *your* job here?"

My…job…

To run away, even if it meant fleeing on her own. It was surely the only answer Mukadeyama had in mind.

Am I really…am I really okay with that?

If Miyo left this dojo, Usui was sure to kill everyone in his way in order to pursue her. But what would happen after she made her escape—what then?

She couldn't afford to be captured. She understood that.

The power of Dream Sight was dangerous. If she was captured and threatened like Kaoruko, she would end up using her Gift to aid the Gifted Communion.

"I suppose I'll have to kill you first, then."

With a cheerful smile on his lips, Usui readied his short sword with practiced movements.

“Don’t expect me to go down easily.”

“Hmm, we’ll see about that.”

Usui’s short sword and Mukadeyama’s saber slammed together, striking a high-pitched metallic chord. However, this single crossing of blades decided the fight all too soon.

“Wh-what……?!”

The saber in Mukadeyama’s hands shattered at the hilt, and the blade fell to the floor. It was almost too fast for Miyo to see.

“Weak,” Usui mumbled.

With a bellicose look, he plunged his short sword toward Mukadeyama’s throat. Evading the tremendously fast thrust, which grazed only his shoulder, Mukadeyama launched a sharp spinning kick in retaliation.

“It seems your Gift strengthens your physical abilities, or something along those lines. Phew, that was a close one.”

Although he had dodged the kick, Usui retreated back several steps and put space between them again.

At this rate…

Miyo surveyed her surroundings.

The first person to cross blades with Usui, Mukadeyama, had already sustained a shoulder wound. While his injury didn’t look severe, blood was streaming from it; if left unattended, he would lose all motion in his arm before long.

Kaoruko remained drained of strength, crouching down with her head to the floor. It was only natural. She had betrayed her

comrades against her will. She was in no mental state to stand up and fight.

Fear showed on the faces of the Gift-users with the sabers drawn on all sides of her.

Even an amateur like Miyo could tell that at this rate, they were at Usui's mercy, and he would toy with them until he decided to end it. And she would have no one but herself to blame for this.

What can I even do about it?

Even if she could pull something off, wouldn't acting on her own just get in everyone else's way?

After spending what felt like an agonizing amount of time wavering, she gave into the heat of the moment and moved, essentially on impulse.

"Fool…!"

Miyo leapt out in front of Usui as he again tried to close in on Mukadeyama. She heard him reproach her from behind, but she brushed it off.

"Stop," she declared, thrusting her arms out.

Miyo was far calmer than she had thought at first. Her heart was beating almost painfully fast, and the tips of her fingers had gone ice cold, yet her voice was direct and unwavering.

Usui curved his lips upward before he stopped his advance and lowered the tip of his short sword.

"Miyo, have you decided to obediently join your father?"

"No. I don't recognize you as my father. Nor will I cooperate with someone who can stand by and hurt others with a smile."

"…I see. Then why did you step out in front of me?"

Usui nodded, as though he found even Miyo's rejection of him amusing.

She was slightly worried about whether words would get through to a man like him or not. Scared, too. However, out of everyone in the dojo, she was the least likely to die here. If someone was going to end up hurt, it was so much better for her to step out in front to shield them instead if it meant that she wouldn't have to see Kiyoka lamenting over his men getting hurt again.

Will help show up if I can buy some time like Squad Leader Mukadeyama did earlier?

While she didn't want anyone to get hurt, she wasn't going to let Usui capture her, either. Nevertheless, she didn't have time to think up a plan, and she had no way of knowing if help was on its way or not.

With so much still unknown to her, she carefully answered Usui's questions.

"Because you……you won't kill me."

"An astute observation. A nauseatingly splendid act of self-sacrifice. How admirable."

"……"

"But your dear father *hates* that sort of thing."

A chill ran down her spine.

If she displeased him, he was sure to kill everyone. Though Miyo was safe because her power of Dream Sight was useful to Usui, along with the fact he thought of her as his daughter, even she could lose her life if he changed his mind.

What was she supposed to do? Should she continue to reject him, or start pandering to him?

Usui continued speaking, heedless of Miyo's distraught thoughts.

"Your mother, Sumi, was the same way. Getting herself married off to a rubbish family like the Saimoris, claiming it was all for the Usubas' sake. It's foolish. No, it's more than stupid—it's repugnant."

As he held his stomach and cackled, something sinister and black seemed to swirl in his pupils. It had a thick, swampy weight to it, like fire rising from solid black smoke.

My mother wasn't foolish at all.

She'd just wanted to protect others—the Usuba family, on the brink of being turned out into the street, the lives of her family, the life her daughter was set to live.

Miyo didn't know very much about her mother, but she clearly understood this much about her. Because she was the very same herself.

I see now, so that's what it must be.

The things Usui had been unable to do. The things he was now after, having created an organization like the Gifted Communion to do so.

These both must have been the same as well.

Miyo took a deep breath and glared back at the man who claimed to be her father.

"I will never be able to be your daughter, and I will never support your ideals."

"So you don't need me, either, then?

"Did my mother say that, too?"

"Shut up… It looks like you need some more education."

Usui growled while tearing out his hair with his open hand. It appeared Miyo could no longer buy any time.

Yet somewhere in her heart, she felt relief.

Usui's reaction left Miyo certain that her father was in fact Shinichi Saimori. Not the man in front of her.

She never imagined a day would come when she would feel grateful to have been born in the Saimori family, which she had so longed to escape. Yet now she was undoubtedly relieved, thankful to know that the days she spent with the Saimori family hadn't all been built upon a lie.

Finding her resolve, she continued speaking.

"If you take me away from here, it still won't save my mother. The woman you wanted to save isn't anywhere to be found anymore."

"You're wrong."

"I'm my own person. So please, just give it up."

It was true that Miyo bore Usuba blood. However, she was also the Saimoris' daughter, born and raised in their household. Miyo stood where she was now because of the days she had spent in that house.

While she didn't know her mother's honest feelings on being married into the Saimori family, at the very least, Miyo didn't think that she would want her daughter to be taken away by Usui.

No matter how much Naoshi Usui had wanted to save Sumi, he couldn't turn back time, and no one could take her place. Miyo wouldn't be influenced by his whims.

"You're too small-minded, Miyo. Your world is far too narrow. My goals aren't confined to such shallow waters. I need you to look out over the vast, wider ocean before you."

Usui was grinning.

"It looks like I'll need to take you by force after all."

He brandished his sharp short sword once more. At the same time, his form melted into the scenery, slowly fading from view.

"*Tch…* If he disappears, there's nothing we can do."

It was impossible to take on an opponent invisible to the eyes and inaudible to the ears.

Mukadeyama's irritation was clear to Miyo.

"Everyone, circle up around Miss Fiancée! Don't let Usui through!"

"Squad Leader Mukadeyama, I—"

Now she could no longer prevent the squad members from sacrificing themselves. Before Miyo could put her thought into words, Mukadeyama shook his head.

"We're out of time. If our sacrifice pains you, then please focus on escaping safely instead."

"No, how could I?" Miyo asked him.

"How long are you going to sit there, Jinnouchi?! Get up! Stand and fight!"

Applying pressure to his shoulder wound, Mukadeyama yelled at Kaoruko, who was still frozen.

Then Miyo saw her firmly grip the hilt of her saber, still in its sheath. Then, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, she stood up.

"I'm sorry, Miyo. I'll clean up the mess my misconduct's caused."

"But… But…"

Kaoruko, her eyes red; Mukadeyama, his uniform stained with blood; and the rest of the squad members carefully watching the vicinity, their sabers in hand—each and every one of them looked as if they were about to walk straight into the gates of hell.

Miyo was powerless in a fight.

“Listen up, everyone! Try to avoid using your Gifts! There’s a chance the effects of everyone’s powers will collide and cancel each other out!”

Everyone nodded at Mukadeyama’s orders.

Despite their resolve, they were still ultimately facing off against someone wielding Usuba Gifts.

“Hnaugh……!”

Standing on guard next to Miyo, Kaoruko suddenly went flying, her body slamming into the floor.

“Kaoruko!”

As Miyo called out her name, Usui grabbed her by the arm.

“Aaah!”

“You’re coming with me. If you don’t want anyone here to get hurt, that is.”

The sinister words, whispered into her ear, made her hair stand on end.

I don’t want to go. But…

The moment Miyo wrenched her body to escape Usui’s grasp, she felt a cold sensation on her neck. She immediately recognized it as the blade of his short sword.

“Now, it’s time for you all to behave.”

The threat was directed to everyone in the dojo, Miyo included.

As things were now, no one could do anything to harm Usui. While he was unlikely to kill her, he’d have no qualms about harming her.

“Miyo…”

Staggering to her feet, Kaoruko called out to her.

I'm… It's too late.

As Usui forced Miyo to walk toward the dojo entrance, his blade still pressed against her neck, the face of her beloved flashed in her mind.

Kiyoka.

Ah, she finally understood. Just thinking of him made her terrified of dying. She didn't want to be separated from him. The heartrending pain made her tears overflow. Her intense desire to learn more about him. Her implacable anxiety about his past with Kaoruko.

She finally understood the true meaning of the emotions in her chest.

"Get away from my fiancée."

It all happened in an instant.

She heard an ice-cold voice from behind her. Just then, Usui fell to the floor, a military boot crushing into his back.

Suddenly freed from Usui's grasp, she staggered to the floor, only to be wrapped in a hug.

"Ah…! Kiyoka."

"Sorry I'm late. Were you crying?"

She looked up and saw the smiling face of the man who she cared for more than any other.

He brushed his white-gloved fingers against Miyo's damp cheeks.

"I cried when I thought about you." No, I couldn't possibly…

She'd never be able to tell him, nor did she want him to come to that realization. Ashamed, Miyo covered her crimson cheeks in her hands.

"Kiyoka…Kudou…!"

Usui spat her fiancé's name and flipped his short sword upside down, swinging the hilt at his boot.

In the brief opening when Kiyoka suddenly shielded Miyo behind him and moved his foot, Usui flipped himself over on the floor and leapt to his feet.

Miyo was flabbergasted that someone of Usui's age could move so lithely.

"You came back after all, did you?"

"Unfortunately for you, we have someone who can see the future working on our side. Though it was already such an obvious feint to begin with."

"Prince Takaihito, then… Hmm, I see. It appears my plans were a bit too simple this time."

Usui shrugged blankly.

While he had lost his original composure, he didn't seem particularly disappointed that his scheme had been thwarted.

Almost as if he didn't believe it had failed at all.

Kiyoka arched his brow slightly, also feeling like something was amiss with Usui's attitude.

"There'll be no next time for you, Naoshi Usui."

"Oh no, things are just getting started."

The man twisted his finely chiseled features into a sick grin of amusement.

At that instant, a group of large balls of water appeared from out of nowhere and flew toward them.

"Eeek……!"

Miyo reflexively shut her eyes. However, Kiyoka and the rest of the soldiers scattered each and every one of the projectiles; none of them hit their marks.

"Must be Houjou."

When she heard Kiyoka sourly murmur this with a click of his tongue, Miyo opened her eyes to find that Usui was already gone.

Is everything…okay?

He might have cloaked himself with his Gift and could still be nearby. Although the thought crossed her might, she was at her mental limit.

Kiyoka was with her.

This alone filled her with a tremendous sense of relief, and she crumbled to the floor.

"Miyo?! What's wrong? Are you hurt?!"

His eyes bugling wide, Kiyoka dropped to his knees in a panic and propped Miyo up. She shook her head to put his mind at ease, prompting him to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Sorry… I guess I felt a bit weak in the knees."

"No, it's my fault for not getting here sooner. It must've been terrifying."

She had indeed been frightened, and yet far beyond the fear, she was comforted to know that they had weathered the disaster without anyone losing their lives, and without Usui taking her away.

Miyo grabbed the sleeve of Kiyoka's coat with her trembling fingers.

“Thank you for coming to save me.”

“I’m glad you’re all right.”

Kiyoka embraced her chilled body. While the tears didn’t come, she truly felt ready to cry.

“Forgive me for interrupting, sir.”

Miyo heard Mukadeyama’s slightly irritated voice from above her head.

Kiyoka glanced at his scowling subordinate and snorted. Then, reluctantly letting go of Miyo and rising to his feet, he glared at Mukadeyama.

“What?”

“Currently, the uninjured men are scouring the area to check if Usui or Houjou are still lurking. The wounded have already been brought to the first aid room. Fortunately, none are seriously hurt.”

Mukadeyama had sustained the harshest injuries. As he gave his report to Kiyoka, the cloth he was pressing to his shoulder turned crimson.

“Gave us an awful beating, didn’t he?”

“…You have my apologies, sir. My powerlessness forced your fiancée to stand front and center agains—*hngh!*”

Before Mukadeyama could finish what he was saying, Kiyoka struck his cheek with the palm of his hand.

“K-Kiyoka!”

“It’s absolutely outrageous that the person you were tasked to guard almost wound up being taken hostage. What exactly are you here to do? I don’t have room in my unit for people who can’t carry out a single task.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what was that about forcing her to stand in the line of fire? Depending on your answer, I’ll have no choice but to consider disciplinary action.”

Standing before Miyo was the famously cold-blooded and harsh version of Commander Kiyoka who she rarely witnessed.

Meanwhile, Mukadeyama, who had been grand and opposing as he rallied the soldiers together a short while ago, was now shrinking back.

Faced with his commanding officer’s cold ogre-like ire, Mukadeyama exhaustively informed Kiyoka of everything that happened following Usui’s arrival, without including the slightest hint of personal feelings on the events.

“Everything is my responsibility. I am prepared for any punishment you deem necessary.”

Mukadeyama apologized with a bow before Kiyoka made him look up. Once again, he thrust his palm across the man’s cheek, the loud smack echoing in the dojo.

Miyo covered her mouth with her hand as she witnessed the painful spectacle.

“Having your sword broken in a single attack from a middle-aged man, getting wounded, only to be shielded by an amateur *and* the very person you were ordered to guard. Are you really a soldier? I struggle to comprehend exactly how someone can possibly fail as hard as you did today.”

“My deepest apologies, sir.”

“I don’t need apologies. It’s been made clear that you’re useless to me. You’ll get that punishment you’re after in due time.”

“Understood, sir.”

“If you really understand, then get a move on. Even you should be able to handle dealing with the aftermath.”

“Yes, sir… If you’ll excuse me.”

Mukadeyama sorrowfully turned around and jogged off.

From Miyo’s perspective, he appeared to have done a splendid job. Usui had simply been too strong of an opponent. That wasn’t his fault, and they had been able to weather Usui’s raid with almost no injuries because Mukadeyama had stood his ground.

“Kiyoka, about Squad Leader Mukadeyama, um…,” she started to say before she could stop herself. If the man himself were here to see this, he’d likely reprimand her for sticking her nose where it didn’t belong again.

Nevertheless, Kiyoka appeared to correctly pick up on her feelings.

“I know. It’s because of Mukadeyama’s hard work that you’re still here right now. He’s an outstanding man. He’ll need to be reprimanded, but don’t worry, I’ll reward him for the work he’s done later.”

“I understand… Um, also.”

There was one other thing weighing on her mind.

Miyo glanced around the inside of the dojo, with the soldiers busily hurrying back and forth. She was already nowhere to be found.

“Wh-what about, Kaoruko?”

Voicing her name aloud made awful images float into her head one after another.

In the military, betrayal earned severe punishment. If someone double-crossed their comrades on the battlefield, the consequences would be immense. To prevent such situations, even execution could be on the table.

Kaoruko hadn't betrayed them out of her own volition. However, that didn't change the fact that she had ultimately invited the enemy inside the station walls.

But she was Miyo's good friend. No matter what feelings Kaoruko may have held during their interactions, the time they spent together had been irreplaceable.

She felt a stabbing and cast her eyes down. Kiyoka placed his large hand on her head and stroked her gently.

"Don't hold out hope."

"……"

Miyo exhaled, as if trying to expel a bad taste from her mouth.

She could only pray that at the very least, her long-awaited first friend would have her life spared.

◇◇◇

Arata, together with the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit soldiers, led by Ookaito, trailed the kidnapped emperor and traveled to the imperial family's vacation home.

Of course, they couldn't just come and go freely from there.

However, the automobile that was being tailed by Arata's familiar headed straight in that direction—before vanishing en route.

"The familiar disappeared…"

Ookaito reacted to Arata's dazed murmur while they were on the move.

"What do you mean 'disappeared'? Have you lost sight of where the automobile is heading?"

"Yes. Perhaps they caught on."

This shoreline roadway was a straight, direct path. If they continued forward, the only thing waiting for them was the area under the Ministry of the Imperial Household jurisdiction where the vacation home stood. It seemed meaningless at this point for their target to shake off Arata's familiar.

However, they might have gotten rid of it with a goal in mind.

Ookaito grimaced; anything that had to do with Gifts was entirely beyond him.

"At any rate, all we can do is press on. They're bound to run into the Ministry of the Imperial Household's security if they continue down this road. Naoshi Usui's Gift doesn't make things pass through walls, right? If they force their way into an area under the Ministry's jurisdiction, there should be traces of them left behind. If there aren't any, well……"

Arata could surmise where Ookaito's evasive statement was leading.

The possibility of the Gifted Communion infiltrating the nation's central apparatus.

While it wasn't something he wanted to think about, whether it had already happened or was still on the horizon, they needed to consider the prospects of the situation before things reached the point of no return.

If there is one other possibility besides that, though…

There was a chance the emperor had never come out here to begin with.

Perhaps the kidnappers had noticed Arata on the lookout at the Imperial Palace and, calculating everything down to the familiar sent to tail them, manipulated what it was seeing to lead them all to a completely different and unrelated location.

Yet another undesirable option. In the worst-case scenario, not only would they lose all traces of the emperor's whereabouts, but it could lead to damaged trust in both Arata himself and the Usuba family as a whole.

Any more suspicion directed toward the Usubas would be bad news.

Arata's group pressed on, until they finally reached the land set aside for the imperial family under the Interior Ministry's administration.

The grounds were surrounded by a thick stone wall and a dense thicket of evergreens, making it impossible for an outside observer to glimpse what was going on inside.

The gate was shut tight.

It looks like the guards are safe, too.

Arata watched Ookaito approach the gate with bitterness. It seemed that one of his worst hunches had been right on the mark.

As expected, when they heard the guard's testimony that no one had passed through, all of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit soldiers grew restless.

"We'll investigate inside for now," Ookaito announced, but many of the soldiers remained unconvinced.

Arata followed after him and stepped inside the imperial family grounds, being showered with thorny looks from the rest of the soldiers all the while.

Naturally, there was no trace that anyone had been inside the vacation home. There weren't even any footprints left behind on the ground or ruts left by an automobile at the entrance. It was clear that no one had been on the premises for the past several hours at least.

Arata could feel in his bones that the slim amount of faith people had in him was beginning to vanish.

“Maybe it was all Usuba lies.”

“He could be coordinating with Usui.”

The whispers began to reach his ears.

“……We’re withdrawing.”

Ookaito’s decision came after they had spent around half the day investigating every nook and cranny of the grounds.

They failed to find any traces after such an inspection, so it was clear that the automobile carrying the emperor hadn’t come here. In other words, Arata had been baited into following after an illusion.

Dammit……!

This would only serve to worsen the Usuba family’s position.

“Major General, sir.”

Before he knew it, Arata had called Ookaito to stop him.

He couldn’t return empty-handed. If he didn’t have any results to show for himself, he’d lose too much face.

“Please give me permission to investigate this area. Even just until the end of the day would be enough.”

“You’re going to continue on your own?”

“Yes.”

Arata knew he was being selfish. Nonetheless, he had a reason why he couldn’t silently back down here.

He bowed, pleading. Ignoring the voice telling him it was useless to beg, Arata kept his head lowered until Ookaito heaved a heavy sigh.

“I’ll allow it. Go ahead and look around until you’re satisfied. I’ll report the situation to Takaihito myself.”

“Thank you very much.”

“The rest of you all are to return back to the capital.”

Ookaito and his men withdrew, leaving Arata on his own.

Now that he was alone, he couldn’t help letting his irritation at his own shamefulness get the better of him. Usui had made a fool out of him. The situation was unbearable.

Why? Why don’t things go my way?

If Usui bore a grudge against the Usubas and was trying to set him up to fail, then he had been hugely successful. At this point, it was only a matter of time before the name Usuba would be reviled by anyone familiar with them.

This wasn’t how things were supposed to play out.

“Dammit! Dammit!” he fervently cursed, kicking up clods of dirt.

Arata had entrusted Kiyoka to protect and save Miyo. That was because he had thought his role was to get a lead on Usui. Yet, in reality, he hadn’t been able to get ahold of anything at all.

Still moved by his irritation, Arata walked around the area helter-skelter. He was single-minded in his pursuit, even as his hands and feet numbed in the cold, and he couldn’t feel his nose anymore.

However, no matter how much he searched around, he couldn’t find a single clue.

It was only natural—no one had come here to begin with.

Before he knew it, the sun had sunk, and without any light sources around, the vicinity was gradually being wrapped in total darkness.

“It was all in vain……wasn’t it?

Arata feared returning to the capital far more than the darkness around him.

Just what kind of reception will be waiting for me?

He was deprecating himself when suddenly he heard footsteps behind him.

“So you did stay behind, then.”

Arata turned around and laid his eyes on a slightly fatigued Naoshi Usui.

He immediately took his gun out from under his coat and aimed the barrel at him.

“This is all your fault…!”

“My fault? *Hah-hah-hah*. That’s a funny thing to say.”

With a pull of the trigger, Arata could take Usui’s life right then and there. Yet the man’s composure never faltered.

“What about this is funny?”

“How couldn’t it be? Who exactly is so prejudiced toward you and the Usubas? Me?”

“That’s not…”

That wasn’t it. It wasn’t Usui who was using whatever reason available to oppress the Usubas, without even attempting to consider their true nature. It was the other Gift-users. The military men.

However, the man standing before him had undoubtedly helped create that situation.

Arata gathered his strength into his trigger finger.

“You don’t think your words will sway me, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I still have a very high opinion of the Usuba family’s Gift-users, you know. You’re not the type to fall for such an easy ploy.”

“Well, well, it seems you do understand after all. In that case, drop dead.”

Arata felt like he was radiating all the murderous rage he held deep inside his heart, but even then, Usui continued to speak.

“Hold on, now. You say that, but back in the capital you feel inferior and lesser, do you not?”

“Do you ever shut up? What does that have to do with you?”

“I might be able to tell you how to make your life just a little bit easier, you know.”

“……You detest the Usubas, don’t you?”

“Who’s to say? I just have one thing that I want to offer you.”

A smile came to his face, dyed red and illuminated in the setting sun, and Usui slowly extended his hand.

“Arata Usuba. Will you join the Gifted Communion?”

What an absurd question. Who in the world would possibly go along with such a slovenly invitation?

Thus, Arata’s search for an answer lasted but a brief moment.

⚜ *CHAPTER 6* ⚜

Feelings Going Forward

Following Usui's raid on the station, Miyo continued accompanying Kiyoka to the station like usual.

However, not everything had necessarily reverted to how things were before.

Usui's whereabouts were once again a mystery, and he still hadn't given up on Miyo. There was little alternative but to curtail her freedom of movement even more.

Under orders from the military high commander, Miyo couldn't even walk unaccompanied inside the station, so she spent her time mending and patching up items at Kiyoka's side in his office.

In comparison to the relaxing time she had spent in the station up until then, her current life was dull and constrained. She felt dispirited thinking about it.

Day after day, she found herself looking for any sight of her very first friend, despite knowing she couldn't possibly be there.

On this frosty, clear-skied day, Miyo was yet again killing time knitting inside Kiyoka's office.

"Commander, may I have a moment?"

Mukadeyama's question was coupled with a rap on the door.

"Come in."

"Pardon my interruption."

It felt like it had been ages since she'd seen Mukadeyama.

Taking responsibility for the unit's disgrace, he had been fostered with a large amount of work, treated as an errand boy while still serving in his position as a squad leader.

Though his wound from Usui appeared to be much better, Mukadeyama nevertheless wore an anxious, stiff look on his face as he stood in front of Kiyoka's desk.

"Commander, would you allow me to borrow your fiancée—Lady Miyo Saimori—for a short while?"

Hearing her own name suddenly come flying from Mukadeyama's mouth, Miyo looked up.

Kiyoka glared at his subordinate after hearing his request.

"Do you think I'd allow that?"

"…No, I don't."

"Then this was a big waste of time, wasn't it? Go back and get to work."

But in a surprising turn of events, Mukadeyama responded to Kiyoka's unambiguous dismissal of his request by bowing abruptly.

"Please, sir. It doesn't have to be for long."

"This is important enough to bear the risks of speaking out, is it?"

"……Please, sir."

Mukadeyama remained deeply bent at the hips, without any signs of raising his head. His pose made his intentions clear—he wasn't going to move from his spot until he got the approval he was after.

Kiyoka appeared to sense his resolve.

"This won't take long, then, will it?"

"No, sir."

"Got it… However, I'm going to be nearby listening, too."

“That won’t be a problem. Thank you very much, sir.”

Mukadeyama finally returned to an upright position and quietly approached Miyo.

Overwhelmed by the somewhat desperate look on his face, she put down the knitting needle in her hands and sat at attention.

“May I trouble you for a bit of your time?”

“O-okay.”

She had no reason to refuse him. Supposing she did, she could keenly sense that just like during his exchange with Kiyoka, he would hold steadfast until she acquiesced.

Urged on by Mukadeyama, she followed behind him, moving to a new location.

It appeared that they were heading to the dojo.

“It’ll be cold where we’re going, Miyo. Is that all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be okay.”

Kiyoka, following even farther behind Miyo, cast a worried glance at his fiancée. Still, Mukadeyama didn’t seem like he would do anything to her detriment, and the cold wasn’t an issue thanks to her *haori* overcoat.

They entered the dojo to find it empty, without another soul in sight.

Since the soldiers had clashed with Usui here, she expected to see sections damaged from the fight, but it appeared to already have been repaired, as if the battle had never happened.

“Forgive me… This was the only place I could think of right now where we could talk without anyone else interrupting us.”

Mukadeyama apologized not with the dignified air he once had, but in a vaguely insecure tone. Flustered, Miyo shook her head.

“It’s not a problem at all, please don’t apologize.”

The station grounds were extremely busy at present.

Usui’s effortless infiltration of their air-tight security, along with the revelation that there was a collaborator in their ranks, had caused an absolute fiasco.

Not only that, but although still unbeknownst to the citizenry, the emperor’s whereabouts remained unknown. Since the situation involved the Gifted Communion, there had been no choice but to pull in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, capable of fighting with their own supernatural powers, to face them.

Kiyoka’s soldiers were scrambling all around the imperial capital to tackle the problem.

Nevertheless, since there were still a number of men working inside the station as well, there were a limited number of places they could calmly converse together.

“Allow me to give my deepest apologies.”

Mukadeyama energetically turned back to Miyo behind him, and again bowed deeply to the ground.

“Huh……?”

This turn of events left her totally confused.

She never would have expected that he, of all people, would bow to her. Finding the scene in front of her far too unbelievable, she turned back to Kiyoka waiting in the wings behind her, but he didn’t look particularly surprised by any of this.

“I have been domineering and arrogant when speaking with you… I insulted you, called you our enemy and a powerless woman. Though

I talked big about not holding any prejudices myself, the truth was that I didn't accept or approve of you. I was a fool."

"You were just speaking the truth…," Miyo stammered, casting her eyes down.

Mukadeyama's assertions about her had been correct, or at the very least convincing. But since he had warned her directly to her face about all this, she'd never felt like she was being unfairly treated or insulted whatsoever.

The blood of the Usubas ran through her veins, and it was reasonable that other Gift-users saw the family as their enemy. Miyo was an inept Gift-user herself, and she couldn't even wield a sword. In an emergency, she was simply a burden.

All of that was true.

Mukadeyama's remarks were different from the ones the other soldiers had directed at Kaoruko. Those comments were made behind her back while ignoring Kaoruko's clear display of her own strength, hence why Miyo had found them so strange.

"No, I was wrong. Back then… If you hadn't stepped out in front of us all when Naoko Usui attacked, I would have lost my life, along with many other men."

"But……I ended up ignoring orders to do that."

Miyo was mortified when she recalled her actions.

She had acted entirely of her own accord while she was supposed to be kept under protection. If anything, her behavior was more deserving of reproach instead.

Yet Mukadeyama raised his voice.

"Not at all! Please let me apologize. I completely underestimated you even though I didn't know anything about you. This made me no

better than the fools spouting biased nonsense at you. You're courageous, Miyo. You protected everyone from harm."

"U-um…"

What was she supposed to say to this? She didn't feel angry at him to begin with.

As she wavered, Kiyoka gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Will you forgive him or not? It's up to you."

"I…"

There wasn't anything for her to forgive in the first place. Mukadeyama wasn't to blame at all.

Miyo looked him in the eyes and began to speak.

"Squad Leader Mukadeyama, you weren't mistaken. It was pure luck that what I did on the day of the attack succeeded. Depending on how things played out, I could have put all of you in danger. That's why…um, I suppose, that would mean I forgive you."

"Thank you…very much."

Mukadeyama's voice was weak; Miyo could sense that this had been deeply troubling him.

When she imagined the painful emotions that must have been tearing at his heart since the incident transpired, she felt that was more than enough.

"Mukadeyama."

"Yes, sir," he replied to Kiyoka, raising his head up.

"I wouldn't say that you handled everything correctly. Your flexibility and adaptability in the moment leaves a lot to be desired. There must have been a better strategy available to you."

"Yes, sir."

“But ultimately, I can only say that with hindsight. Looking at your results alone, the mere fact no one lost their lives is more than enough to say you acted correctly.”

“Commander…”

“Earlier, you asked me if you would be disciplined for this incident. If anything, I’m also accountable for failing to make the right call during Usui’s assault. That’s why,” Kiyoka continued, “I’ll be expecting good things from you here on out. Work hard.”

“Understood, sir.”

Mukadeyama bowed deeply yet again, then turned back to Miyo.

“Going forward, I’m going to try changing the other men’s way of thinking as well. I’ll also strive to ensure this organization can be unashamedly lauded as a proper meritocracy. For Jinnouchi’s sake, as well.”

Miyo simply nodded, slowly.

Mukadeyama had plenty of leadership experience. If he claimed that he would take the initiative to bring change, Miyo knew it would work out smoothly.

Leaving Mukadeyama, who needed to attend to his next task, behind in the dojo, Miyo returned to the office with Kiyoka.

On the way there, her mind was ultimately occupied with thoughts of her friend.

“Kiyoka, about Kaoruko…”

Even since the attack, she hadn’t appeared at the station at all. She was currently being held at the military headquarters, awaiting sentencing. Given the gravity of her betrayal, there was nothing out of line about this.

The sole consolation was that Ookaito was protecting her from torture.

“Is it bothering you?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Miyo looked around as she walked.

In this corridor and in all the rooms that lined it—no matter where she glanced, the moments she’d spent with Kaoruko vividly replayed in her mind.

While they weren’t all pleasant, the memories she shared with her very first friend were precious to her.

I miss her.

Without Kaoruko’s smiling face nearby, Miyo felt unbearably lonely, like there was hole in her heart.

“Betrayal cannot be tolerated.”

Miyo’s heart went cold at Kiyoka’s quiet comment.

Logically, she understood. An outsider shouldn’t speak about things they didn’t know about. Still, it was heartbreaking that Kaoruko’s life from here on out would be decided based on the sole fact she had been in communication with the enemy.

“Is there anything you can do to save her?”

Before she knew it, Miyo had stopped walking and verbalized her hopes out loud.

Her senses tried to prevent her from putting the next words together, but her tongue was already in motion and didn’t stop.

“Kaoruko was forced into cooperating with the Gifted Communion to save her family.”

“This isn’t for you to decide.”

“I—I know. But…”

Kiyoka’s gaze was cold as he responded to Miyo’s attempts to argue on her friend’s behalf.

“The military will decide how to deal with Jinnouchi. Nothing you say will change that.”

“…That might be true for me. But you might be able to save her, right?”

“I won’t be helping to bend military regulations.”

Her fiancé’s tone had a sharpness that he had never directed at Miyo before, and she almost quivered at the reply.

But this was one thing she couldn’t afford to back down on.

“Kiyoka, are you saying that you don’t care what happens to her at all?”

She hadn’t meant to phrase it like that.

Of course Kiyoka must have been worried about Kaoruko. As a comrade-in-arms, and someone he had known much longer than he had Miyo, he had to be concerned about her.

But…

It was Miyo’s fault that Usui had twisted Kaoruko into following his whims. He’d used her in an attempt to take Miyo for himself.

It was agonizing to think that Kaoruko had been forced into this unjust position because of her.

“If they let Jinnouchi off the hook for this, it will set a bad example. Stop being selfish.”

“But I’m not being selfish, it’s—”

The moment the words left her mouth, Miyo realized just how entitled she was being. She fell silent as it dawned on her that she was acting like a spoiled child.

The cold gaze she was met with then stuck hard in her chest.

“Give up on trying to help her.”

Unable to fight against what was clearly Kiyoka’s ultimatum, while also lacking any words to overrule him, Miyo bit down on her lips.

◇◇◇

Her bustling daily life was passing by in the blink of an eye.

Before she realized it, it was the last day of the year, with a new one just beyond the horizon.

Miyo was spending that day at the Kudou family main estate, feeling a bit emotional.

At Hazuki’s insistence, they would be holding a get-together with some of their trusted mutual acquaintances that afternoon. It wasn’t a full-on party, but it was a chance to give everyone space to unwind and share their troubles.

Of course, it was normal for people to spend the end of year holidays with family, so attendance wasn’t mandatory.

That being said, the gathering itself appeared to be for Kiyoka in particular, who would try to spend both New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day avoiding his family if left alone.

“Come on in, you two. I was waiting for you!”

Still as overwhelmed as ever by the extravagant mansion, Miyo was given an ardent welcome together with Kiyoka as soon as they arrived.

Hazuki wore a dark red dress, looking just as beautiful as always.

“Sis… Please tone it down, it’s embarrassing to see from someone your age.”

Hazuki pouted in response to Kiyoka’s exasperated reprimanding.

“Oh shush. Your moonstruck ogling at Miyo is hardly becoming for someone your age, too.”

“I haven’t been ogling her. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Miyo couldn’t keep from smiling as she watched the two of them chirp back and forth.

This was how they always acted when they met up. It was a joy for Miyo, since she got to witness expressions on Kiyoka’s face that she never would see when it was just the two of them together.

They were both shown into the parlor, where they would wait until it was time to eat.

Though nothing seemed to have changed between them on the surface, both Miyo and Kiyoka had felt somewhat awkward around each other ever since the day she’d argued with him over Kaoruko’s treatment.

While Miyo had felt uncertain about Kaoruko at first, especially when she’d learned about her relationship with Kiyoka, the thought that he would be abandoning Kaoruko now caused antipathy to well up inside her.

It is truly too late to do anything at all?

During the hustle and bustle of her daily life, the question of Kaoruko’s fate wasn’t able to weigh on her mind. But whenever she stopped for a moment to rest, anxiety and frustration would suddenly burst to the forefront of her mind.

“Sorry for making you play along with my sister’s absurdity.”

Seeing Kiyoka heave a sigh with a hand to his forehead, Miyo returned to her senses, shaking her head with a smile.

“It’s not absurd at all. I wanted to see Sis, too, so I’m happy to be here.”

“But the end of the year’s hectic, right?”

It was true that Miyo had a number of things she needed to do, but she had the time to spare for a lunch get-together.

She had already finished most of the end-of-year cleaning around the house and had made as much of the New Year’s food as she could.

All that being said.

I can’t believe it’s New Year’s Eve…

This past year had been a raging torrent the likes of which Miyo had never experienced before, and likely never would again. It was a drastic departure from what this time had been like the year before, which she’d spent huddled up inside her cold room inside the Saimori house.

She couldn’t even believe it had been less than a full year since she had started living with Kiyoka. Her life had been such a blur since leaving home that she couldn’t even reminisce about everything that had happened.

“It’s a busy time of year, but it’s fulfilling and enjoyable… Far more than it has been in the past.”

She picked up her cup of black tea and gazed at the steam rising out of it.

“I see. As long as you’re fine with it, then.”

Miyo loved spending quiet time alone with Kiyoka more than anything in the world.

She was still reserved, and she still had her share of worries, but she had found some measure of happiness. If Miyo from a year ago looked at herself now, she would surely think it was some unbelievable fantasy.

As they waited, occasionally taking sips of their teas and conversing about nothing in particular, they sensed the arrival of more and more guests from beyond the parlor door.

Right as they heard loud knocking on the parlor door, it was vigorously thrown wide open.

“Hello, hello! How do you do, Commander? Miss Miyo?”

Energetically bounding into the room was the man previously recovering from his heavy wounds in the hospital, Godou.

“…Oh great, she invited another loud and annoying one to deal with.”

“Oh, c’mon, Commander, listen to you. Hasn’t it been hard not having me around? You can’t fool me!”

Smiling, Godou looked just as lively and energetic as he had been before his injuries.

“Have your wounds healed already, Mr. Godou?”

He nodded in response to Miyo’s question.

“Absolutely. Sorry for worrying you! I’m back to a hundred percent. It took me so much longer than expected to get discharged that I was ready to blow!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Arata was the next person to come into the parlor.

“I see everyone’s here.”

Her cousin, dressed as always in his perfectly fitted suit, didn't seem any different at all. But that made her anxious.

Miyo had heard about what had happened the day Usui raided the station.

Apparently, he'd been tricked into following a decoy in pursuit of the kidnapped emperor, and he felt responsible for coming away from the situation without any results to show for it. Since then, Arata had been doggedly tailing Usui and rarely found time to come back home, which prompted Grandfather Yoshirou to come to Miyo to discuss the situation.

It was understandable. The severe criticism levied at the Usubas by people familiar with them had grown even harsher because of this event.

With the pride of his family on the line, Arata couldn't allow his blunder to stand.

I'm sure I would do the very same thing if put in his position.

Annoyed and restless. The emotions must have been swirling inside of him.

Thus, given such circumstances, it had truly been a fair bit of time since she had last saw him.

At first glance, he appeared to be just the same as always on the surface, but she couldn't really trust her intuition. He was skilled at concealing his own emotions, so his inner thoughts likely deviated greatly from his outwardly cheery demeanor.

"Have you been well, Miyo?"

"Oh, um, yes. You seem well, too, Arata."

"Fortunately. Though there's plenty of troubles on my plate."

As Miyo and Arata conversed together, Kiyoka grunted with displeasure. Picking up on this, Arata sent vaguely provocative look his way.

“If you act that petty, Major, you’ll also make poor Miyo feel uncomfortable, you know.”

“Mind your own business.”

It had been quite a while since Miyo had seen this causal back-and-forth of theirs.

Afterward, Kazushi showed up, greeting Hazuki’s other friends and causing yet another uproar as soon as he saw Godou. As the get-together got busier, it grew closer to lunchtime.

Finally, the lone remaining guest arrived.

Miyo couldn’t believe her eyes when she looked out the window.

“Kaoruko?”

Her voice trembled slightly.

Right after she noticed the automobile suddenly stop in front of the mansion, stepping out of it was the friend who had been weighing on her mind, who she had longed to see.

There was no doubt it was her friend Kaoruko Jinnouchi herself, wearing a white shirt with military pants beneath a long coat.

Ookaito got out of the car alongside her, and they both passed through the entryway. Kiyoka and Godou recognized the arrival of their superior and went out into the entryway to greet him.

Miyo approached the door after them, to see what was happening.

“Welcome, Jinnouchi.”

“Th-thank you for having me.”

Kaoruko responded to Hazuki's greeting in a slightly high-pitched voice, handing over a small gift wrapped up in cloth. Hazuki thanked her, smiled, and turned to face Ookaito next.

"Thanks for all the trouble."

"Not really. I needed to be here to witness Jinnouchi's release either way. It wasn't any extra trouble. Kiyoka, Yoshito, you both better be sure to relax during this time off, got it?"

"Yessir."

"You gooot it!"

Replying to them both with a nod, Ookaito turned around before Hazuki stopped him.

"You're leaving already?"

"Yeah. My parents wouldn't be happy if I stayed too long in this mansion. Asahi is waiting for me to come home, too."

"I see. Oh, hold on a minute."

Hazuki responded with a warm smile before she had the servants bring her a wrapped package, which she then handed to Ookaito.

"Here. It's a present for Asahi. Can you keep it a secret from your mother and father?"

"Got it."

As Ookaito took the gift, he and Miyo locked eyes for a brief moment. She bowed to him, and he replied with a simple nod.

Watching as Ookaito departed the mansion, everyone sighed with relief. Only Miyo ran straight over to Kaoruko instead.

"Kaoruko!"

"Oh…Miyo."

Now that she was face-to-face with her friend for the first time in a while, Miyo noticed she was a bit thinner than she remembered, and her complexion wasn't in great shape.

As Miyo saw her friend drop her eyes to the floor in guilt, she grabbed her hand without hesitation.

"Kaoruko, have you been well?"

"Yeah… Um."

Kaoruko grimaced with sadness, and after looking across the people gathered in the entryway, she gave a vigorous bow.

"I'm truly very, very sorry! I caused you so much trouble!"

Scattered teardrops fell onto the floor and sunk into the entryway concrete.

There was no excusing Kaoruko's act of betrayal.

However, it had also been partly unavoidable. Convinced that her family's dojo and her Giftless father had been taken hostage, she had been left with no other choice but to do as Usui told.

Miyo's heart ached when she imagined the guilt that must have been tormenting Kaoruko.

"Pick your head up, Jinnouchi."

Kiyoka was the one to address her.

Slowly raising her head up, Kaoruko's eyes were wet with tears.

"I'm sure the major general's reprimanded you enough already, so there's no point in saying anything more."

"Commander…"

"Sis, if everyone's here, shouldn't we hurry up and get things started?"

Kiyoka turned his head and put forth a suggestion to Hazuki. His sister answered with a cheerful smile.

“Good point. All right everyone. For today’s meal, I tried following how the West does things, and served it buffet style. Let’s all head to the dining hall.”

Without getting swept along with everyone else as they began to move, Miyo pulled Kaoruko by the hand.

“We should get going, too.”

“……I’m sorry, Miyo.”

“Please, no more apologizing.”

Kaoruko hadn’t actually been acquitted of anything. Miyo had also heard from Kiyoka that it would be impossible to absolve her of anything.

Simply accepting one’s punishment didn’t then mean the crime itself disappeared along with it. However, blaming and tormenting someone forever wouldn’t make anyone happy.

“I’m truly glad, from the bottom of my heart, that you and I could become friends. And I’m so happy that you’re able to return like this. Do you feel any different?”

In response to Miyo’s question, Kaoruko shook her head.

“I’m happy I’m able to talk with you again, too. Are you sure it’s okay for me to remain your friend after everything? I’m not a nuisance, am I?”

“Not at all. So please, I hope we can keep being friends from here on out.”

“Yeah, me too…!”

Miyo couldn’t suppress a smile at her friend, again moved to excessive tears, before then heading off to the dining hall, together.

EPILOGUE

Miyo placed the soba noodles in the boiling pot.

She stirred the contents of the pot with cooking chopsticks, sending warm steam floating into the air.

Today was so much fun.

They had returned from the luncheon gathering at the Kudou main estate, and now the sun had almost sunk below the horizon. Miyo was in the kitchen, preparing their dinner to ring in the new year.

There hadn't been that many people at lunch, but she had a great time.

The spread there had been delicious, filled with all sorts of rare types of western cooking, and it had been exciting to freely move around and converse with a variety of different people, so Miyo felt it had been a very fulfilling afternoon.

"Oh no."

She had a hunch that if she got absorbed in her thoughts, she'd overcook the noodles. Miyo frantically took the pot off of the flame and sighed with relief.

Scooping up one of the hot soba noodles, she cooled it off before putting it in her mouth. If she was going to be using them for soup, it might have been better to keep them a little firmer, but they were still acceptable.

We need to have dinner before they get soggy.

Miyo swiftly loaded the soba noodles into two porcelain bowls and poured hot soup over them. On top, she placed the already fried pieces of tempura, and garnished each with a small topping of green onions.

The tempura mostly consisted of cod, shrimp, and vegetables.

“A pretty good job, I would say.”

It was her first time making New Year’s Eve soba, and she was glad that she had asked Yurie about how to make it ahead of time. Though, it didn’t give her much trouble, as she simply boiled the noodles, and the tempura was no different from the tempura made countless times before. The soup flavor was Yurie’s secret recipe.

In addition to the New Year’s Eve soba that night, she had also prepared boiled root vegetables—carrots and daikon among others—pickled Chinese cabbage, together with an exceptional bottle of refined sake.

The kitchen looked like a colorful cornucopia simply from all the different dishes.

“Tee-hee.”

The mere fragrance of the soup broth wafting in the air filled Miyo with relief.

Reality wasn’t all fun and games; it also brought plenty of anxieties, along with mental fatigue that arose from the turmoil of daily life.

However, today was New Year’s Eve, and tomorrow was the beginning of the New Year holidays. She wanted to at least enjoy the short time in peace. She wanted Kiyoka to spend the time in mental tranquility, too.

“Kiyoka, dinner’s ready.”

“Got it.”

When she popped her head into the living room, Kiyoka was passing his eyes over some documents with a scowl.

Hazuki had invited them to spend the night in the main estate, but Kiyoka didn't wait a second before turning her down. Miyo was sure these documents were one of the reasons why.

Though he was supposed to have a few days off from work for New Year's, there was still a small number of reports coming in due to all the unresolved issues on his unit's plate at the moment. He must have wanted to get them out of the way before things got out of hand again.

Miyo spoke up while she arranged the plates on the table.

"…Um, why don't you take a bit of a break?"

"Right, right. Sorry."

Initially giving a half-hearted response, Kiyoka noticed the dinner lined up in front of him and began gathering together the wide spread of documents in front of him.

Miyo turned once again to face Kiyoka as he went about and bowed her head.

"Thank you, Kiyoka."

She sensed that he was slightly taken aback, wondering where Miyo's sudden gratitude was coming from.

"For what?"

"For Kaoruko. You helped her, didn't you?"

Miyo thought back to Kiyoka and Kaoruko's exchange at the Kudou main estate.

Kiyoka had seemed cold and indifferent, but Miyo could tell it essentially meant that he had forgiven her. She wasn't conceited enough to dare think her appeal was what made him forgive Kaoruko. Nevertheless, she was happy that in the end, she hadn't lost her first-ever friend.

“There’s no need to thank me.”

Kiyoka turned away, but there wasn’t the slightest tinge of anger in his eyes.

“Our fight against the Gifted Communion is only going to get more intense from here on out. We can’t afford to lose firepower.”

Alarmed to hear the words “Gifted Communion,” yet another new wave of anxiety welled up in her.

“Has…has something happened?”

“No. If anything, the reports say there hasn’t been any new developments. It’s just that there might be something inside of them that could serve as a lead or clue.”

“……So the Gifted Communion is nowhere to be found?”

“That’s right. We don’t even have an idea where exactly the emperor ended up, either. They’re staying quiet right now, but that’s all the more reason to think about the possibility that they’re hatching something big.”

Usui had raided the station and been fought off by Kiyoka. However, at the time, the man’s demeanor hadn’t looked particularly upset, and not at all like someone who just had their plans foiled.

Something awful was on the horizon.

Even a layperson like Miyo could feel it in her bones.

Kiyoka sighed slightly, and gently gripped Miyo’s hand.

“It’s okay. I’ll try to do something about everything as fast as I can. Don’t let it worry you… Though, I’m sure that’s asking the impossible.”

“I’ll try.”

Encouraged by his gentle palm, Miyo managed a slight smile.

The last night of the year quietly wore on.

The two had finished eating their New Year's Eve soba and were relaxing for a spell when snow came fluttering around outside.

"Started coming down, did it?"

When Miyo opened the sliding door connecting to the outer corridor, Kiyoka's face brightened at the scene he saw peeking through the crack.

The light from the electric lamp in the living room spilled out onto the veranda, illuminating the white petals dancing through the air. A thin layer had already settled over the courtyard, like a sprinkling of sugar.

"Snow……"

Miyo hadn't been fond of either snow or winter itself.

Without a brazier in her cramped room back in her old home, every year the terrible cold was torturous. However, looking at the white scenery from inside a warm home, she found it whimsical, a vibrant yet soundless sight.

"Miyo."

Turning at hearing her name, Miyo saw that Kiyoka was drinking from his sake cup as he gazed outside.

"Come here."

"Okay."

She sat down beside him.

"This year was a good one. Because I was able to meet you."

Beside her, she heard his soft, gentle voice.

But, in that case, it was even better of a year for me…

At this time last year, she never would have imagined it. That a winter would come where she wouldn't be wishing for herself to freeze to death in the cold.

That she'd have the chance to meet someone so dear to her, so inseparable.

"Yes, um, I—I……feel the same way."

The instant she replied, her body was pulled toward his—and their lips brushed against each other.

Her second kiss had the faint aroma of sake.

The temple bell rang.

The last vestiges of the year gave them a silent, snowy embrace and passed on into the next.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone, I hope you're all doing great.

This is Akumi Agitogi, the author whose difficult-to-write/difficult-to-read/hard-to-remember pen name is finally catching on, to the point where she's started to mistakenly believe, "Hey, maybe it's actually kind of cool?"

My Happy Marriage is now up to volume four, and it feels almost unbelievable that my debut series would make it this far.

This volume was a continuation from the last one, and I'm sure there are some readers who are *very* curious to learn what exactly ended up happening to a certain character, but I hope you enjoyed it. I'm sorry to those who were looking forward to Miyo and Kiyoka's actual wedding. Not yet.

Now that the story's gotten to volume four, there have been quite a few more characters introduced to the story. The highlight of the new characters in this volume is the first of Kiyoka's subordinates to be named, discounting a certain man who was caught in an explosion. I centered on Miyo as the main protagonist up until now, so the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit wasn't touched on too extensively, but together with the introduction of the new characters, I hope that element of the story has gotten a bit more defined.

Also, while I'm sure it's obvious at this point, this is also a story about Miyo's personal growth. As she interacts with the new characters, as the author, I hope that it'll allow her to mature and grow even more as a person. She'll still face more trials before the story reaches their scheduled springtime wedding, but I'm sure the two of them will manage to overcome them somehow!

The manga adaptation by Rito Kousaka is being serialized in Square Enix's "Gangan Online" to rave reviews! Also, by the time this fourth volume of *My Happy Marriage* goes on sale, the second volume of the manga adaptation should be in stores as well, so I hope you'll pick it up, too.

Allow me a moment to say that this volume reached an absolutely historical and record-breaking degree of down-to-the-wire madness, and I ended up causing my editor an enormous amount of trouble. I'm very sorry. Thank you so much.

Also, to Tsukiho Tsukioka, and the unimaginably beautiful cover illustration for volume four. I truly thank you for your work.

Finally, to all the readers who have continued to accompany me on this journey. I have you to thank for being able to continue this story. You have my humblest gratitude.

Until next time.

Akumi Agitogi

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